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**Child neglect and social work practice:
(re)producing institutional realities in and
through interaction**

by

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Doctor of Philosophy in Social Work

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Declaration

I confirm that this thesis is all my own work and has not been submitted, in whole or in part, for a degree at another university

Abstract

The way that the state responds when there are concerns about the welfare of children is related to values and conceptualisations regarding the rights, roles and responsibilities of children, parents, families, social workers and the state which have predominantly been examined and theorised at the broader organisational, political and societal level. Yet, there is a lack of research about how the rights, roles and responsibilities of children, parents, families and the state are constructed at an interactional level. This thesis examines the approaches to working with neglected children and their parents that are constructed in and through interaction, attending to the relationships between children, parents, social workers and the state that are constructed interactionally. In a socio-political context that has increasingly responsibilised parents, a focus on child neglect is particularly pertinent because poverty and social deprivation render the attribution of responsibility to parents more problematic. This study draws on social constructionism and uses an interactional sociolinguistics analytic approach to examine how approaches to working with children, parents and families are constructed in accounts of practice obtained through interviews and focus groups with social workers and in a practice context: the child protection conference.

The findings of the study show that social workers construct and negotiate multiple ideals of social work with children and families in their accounts of practice in relation to neglect. Tensions and contradictions between ideals are navigated through preferencing interactionally the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm. Analysis of the nature and extent of parents' and professionals' participation in child protection conferences provides a new model that extends our understanding of interaction in these meetings. The findings reveal the complex ways in which parents' contributions are marginalised because they are interactionally disempowered. This challenges the ideal of participation and demonstrates that working in partnership with parents and anti-oppressive practice, core principles of social work, remain empty signifiers, not interactionally achieved. Together, these two complementary strands of the research demonstrate that a dominant child protection approach is constructed interactionally, reflecting but also constituting the broader context in which a similar approach dominates. This study contributes a greater understanding of how, in relation to child protection work, the local interactional context shapes and is shaped by institutional realities.

Introduction

This thesis examines the approaches to working with children, parents¹ and families when there are concerns about neglect that are constructed in and through interaction, attending to the relationships between children, parents, social workers and the state that are constructed interactionally. It takes a social constructionist approach and connects the interactional level to the broader understandings that are present in policy and at a system level. A focus on child neglect is pertinent because it is the most commonly recorded type of maltreatment (Department for Education, 2019). Moreover, in a socio-political context which increasingly responsabilises parents, issues of parental culpability are more problematic due to links between neglect, poverty and social deprivation and when the gendered nature of neglect is considered. This is an interdisciplinary research project that brings together social work and sociolinguistics. Using an interactional sociolinguistics analytic approach, this qualitative study explores how social workers, in accounts of their practice, construct and negotiate the ideals of social work with children and families in relation to child neglect and how children, parents and social workers are positioned within these ideals. It also examines how parents and professionals² construct themselves and are constructed by others in child protection conferences that involve concerns about child neglect. It does this through an analysis of audio recordings of these meetings that considers the nature and extent of parents' and professionals' participation in the interaction. This thesis contributes new knowledge in relation to how broader discourses about how the state and social workers respond to children, parents and families when there are concerns about children's welfare connect with how children, parents, social workers and the state are positioned, in relation to child neglect, at the micro level. It also extends previous research by furthering our understanding of interaction in child protection conferences and of how different parties participate in these meetings.

¹Legislation and policy relating to protecting children and promoting their welfare uses the gender-neutral terminology 'parents' and 'parenting'. Yet it is principally women who are held culpable and are the focus of social work intervention with families and preventative programmes. Additionally, definitions and theorisation in relation to neglect are highly gendered but this is not explicitly acknowledged. Whilst I recognise the difficulties of referring to 'parents', I predominantly use this term throughout this thesis, also using the terms mother and father when appropriate and relevant.

² Here I refer to all professionals who attend child protection conferences

In this introductory chapter I begin by providing the background and rationale for the research. I then provide the justification for this study's focus on child neglect. Next, I set out the aims and scope of the research and present the research questions I seek to address. The final section of this chapter contains an overview of the organisation of the following six chapters of this thesis.

Background and rationale

The way that the state responds when families are experiencing difficulties and there are concerns about the welfare of children is related to values and conceptualisations regarding the rights, roles and responsibilities of children, parents, families and the state. Whilst these relationships between children, parents and the state are highly complex, there are two prevailing ways of conceptualising them: an emphasis on family support and an emphasis on a tertiary model of child protection (Gilbert *et al.*, 2011). These perspectives, which have a long history (Verhallen *et al.*, 2019), encompass 'different versions of what is considered to constitute the rights of families and the role of the State' (Verhallen *et al.*, 2019, pg. 288). They differ according to how child abuse and neglect are understood, how acceptable parenting practices are defined, how systems of protection are organised and the role of the state in protecting children and promoting their well-being (Gilbert *et al.*, 2011; Parton, 2014).

A family support approach understands child abuse and neglect as arising from family conflict or dysfunction with strong contributions from social and psychological difficulties including intersecting aspects of poverty, domestic violence, racism, parental substance misuse, disability and mental health problems (Bywaters *et al.*, 2016b; Gilbert *et al.*, 2011). The state responds to families' problems by primarily offering supportive and preventative work (often with therapeutic underpinnings) for families' problems, focusing on parent-child relationships and the care of children (Parton, 2017). A relationship between the family and the state premised on partnership is emphasised (Gilbert *et al.*, 2011), with associated ideas about power and powerlessness. At the other end of the continuum, in a child protection approach the state acts to identify and protect

children at risk of or experiencing harm, primarily attributable to parents' acts or omissions. It responds in an investigative way, relying on a legal framework that provides for authoritarian intervention (Parton, 2014). Families' problems are framed in an individualistic way and the relationship between the state and the parents can be characterised as adversarial (Parton, 2017).

Whilst these two perspectives are presented here as distinct, both elements are present in different combinations and to different degrees in different countries' child welfare systems, alongside other considerations (Connolly & Katz, 2019). In some countries a child protection approach dominates and in others there is an orientation towards family service (Gilbert *et al.*, 2011). A child-focused orientation which borrows elements from the two approaches increasingly characterises the child welfare systems in many high-income countries (Gilbert *et al.*, 2011). The extent to which these approaches are prioritised and are amalgamated within single systems shifts, evolves and develops over time as different, sometimes competing, factors become influential (Parton, 2014), reflecting tensions and debates about the most appropriate ways of protecting children and promoting their welfare. The policy orientation of a country is also significantly shaped by socio-cultural, political, legal and economic contexts (Gilbert *et al.*, 2011). Within any child welfare system, regardless of the specific orientation or combination of perspectives, there will be tensions and contradictions between family support and child protection and also (in)congruities with other aspects of social work such as the value base and relationship-based practice (Holt & Kelly, 2018; Lonne *et al.*, 2009; Parton, 1997).

In England³, the appropriate balance between child protection and a family support approach has been a perpetual consideration (e.g. Department of Health, 1995; Parton, 1997) (see Chapter 1). During the period of the New Labour government a child-focused orientation became more dominant, following a period in which a child protection approach prevailed (Parton, 2014). However, the current system in which social workers and other professionals operate has again become more child protection-focused (Parton & Williams, 2017). Reflecting a wider neo-liberal

³ Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have separate frameworks of legislation, guidance and practice to identify children who are at risk of harm, take action to protect those children and prevent further abuse occurring.

political ideology about the responsibilities of individual citizens, parents are held responsible for their children's wellbeing and future outcomes and parenting is instrumentalised with a heavy emphasis on what parents can do to improve their parenting skills (Holt & Kelly, 2016). Consequently, when there are risks or potential risks to children's development or wellbeing, and what constitutes a risk to children and associated ideas of abuse have broadened significantly since the 1970s, parents are identified as culpable and as having the agency to change their circumstances (Morris *et al.*, 2017).

However, the impact of poverty and other forms of disadvantage on the lives of parents, families and children are under-acknowledged. Consequently, parents are identified as culpable for situations that are frequently outside of their control, despite evidence of the social determinants that contribute to a likelihood of harm (e.g. Bywaters *et al.*, 2018; Bywaters *et al.*, 2016b). Holding parents accountable when the context in which parenting occurs is insufficiently considered has particular implications for women. It is overwhelmingly mothers who are identified as responsible for children's care and consequently are identified as 'perpetrators' of child neglect (Daniel & Taylor, 2006; Swift, 1995). They are also primarily the focus of intervention intended to improve families' situations and the well-being of children (Edwards *et al.*, 2015; Farmer & Owen, 1995). Moreover, poverty and other adversities impact more significantly on certain groups such as women, minority ethnic groups and those with disabilities (MacInnes *et al.*, 2014; Platt, 2009; Stone *et al.*, 2019). The lack of recognition of the impact of intersecting adversities on parents and families conflicts with the social work commitment to anti-oppressive practice and social justice (Dalrymple & Burke, 2006; Thompson, 2016).

Whilst the Children Acts (1989, 2004) continue to provide a legal framework for practice, since 2010 the child welfare system's response to families' problems has become increasingly authoritarian (Parton, 2014). It is predominantly focused on investigation and has a greater reliance on statutory interventions such as child protection plans and taking children into care (Parton & Williams, 2017). The role of family support in securing and promoting children's welfare is not prioritised in contrast to the dominant child protection approach. Whilst parents are identified as responsible for families' problems and are expected to take action to change their

situations, within specified time limits, the services available to support them in doing this have been significantly diminished as a result of austerity and cuts to public spending (Action for Children *et al.*, 2016; National Children's Bureau, 2012; Parton, 2014; UNISON Local Government, 2016). Moreover, the time available for social workers to work face-to-face with families has been eroded due to increasing numbers of referrals, an over-bureaucratized system and problems with recruitment and retention (Baginsky, 2013; BASW, 2013; Broadhurst *et al.*, 2010; Holt & Kelly, 2018; Munro, 2011a). Austerity and poverty have resulted in children and families with greater levels of need (Featherstone *et al.*, 2014b), yet reduced services and higher operational thresholds mean that it is increasingly difficult for them to access support (Tunstall & Willow, 2017). When thresholds are reached, children and families are often in crisis and the response is coercive and risk-led, resulting in increased statutory intervention (Bywaters *et al.*, 2018; Hood *et al.*, 2020; Tunstall & Willow, 2017). The current situation in England is explored further in Chapter 1 within the context of its historical development and associated key tensions and debates.

The approaches and orientations indicated above relating to protecting children and promoting their welfare have predominantly been examined and theorised at the broader organisational, political and societal level. However, if we take a discursive approach to understanding these institutional realities, they are framed as discursively constructed, emphasising the constitutive role of language (Roberts & Sarangi, 2005). Consequently, the role of social interaction in meaning making becomes important (Burr, 2015; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Yet, there is a lack of research about how the rights, roles and responsibilities of children, parents, families and the state are constructed interactionally in the sites where social work with children and families takes place and in talk about social work practice.

This thesis aligns with a small body of studies on social work and social work practices that draw on discursive methods, focusing on the study of language use and interaction (e.g. Hall *et al.*, 2014; Hall *et al.*, 2003; Hall *et al.*, 2006; Jokinen *et al.*, 1999). It focuses on meaning making as it takes place in interaction and explores the kinds of approaches to working with children, parents and families that are constructed at the interactional level, that is in accounts of practice provided in

interviews and focus groups and in practice contexts where neglect as a category of abuse is invoked. It looks into situated practices in the accounts of social workers and in professional-parent interaction. In the current child protection-focused context, the thesis pays special attention to the concept of partnership and particularly focuses on how parents' participation is enacted in the situated context of the child protection conference. The contextualisation of situated meanings and understandings is also important. Consequently, this thesis explores the connection between the relationships between children, parents and the state that are constructed interactionally and the broader discourses that are present in policy and at a system level, such as child protection and family support, and the associated key debates and tensions. Identifying how relationships between children, parents and the state are constructed at the micro level can contribute to a greater understanding about whether and how broader constructions are translated into accounts of practice and practice contexts. As detailed further in Chapter 3, this research takes a social constructionist perspective, particularly attending to the use of language to negotiate social meanings and practices and to construct the institutional realities (Boden, 1994). It also draws on an interactional sociolinguistics analytic approach in considering the connection between what happens at a local, interactional level and the wider context.

The specific social work practice context that is the focus of this research is the child protection conference and the following section describes the function and organisation of these meetings.

Child protection conferences: Key sites for social work practice

A key part of this research is exploring the kinds of approaches to working with children, parents and families, including how children, parents and the state are positioned, that are constructed in a critical practice context: the child protection conference where decisions about how to protect children are made.

Convened under child protection procedures (HM Government, 2018), a child protection conference is held by the local authority to assess all relevant information obtained as a result of a child protection investigation. The conference needs to plan how best to safeguard and promote the welfare of a child who, it has been

determined, has suffered, or is at risk of, significant harm. The conference is mandated to make a decision about whether the child should be subject to a child protection plan and, if so, under which category of harm: neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and multiple categories (HM Government, 2018). This plan is then implemented and reviewed after three months and then every six months in further conferences. Consequently, in these meetings there is a specific focus on definitions and thresholds (i.e. whether there is risk of significant harm and the category of harm) as set out in the primary and secondary legislation.

Child protection conferences are inter-agency and multi-professional meetings. They endeavour to bring together the practitioners most involved with the child and family (for example teachers and health professionals) to share information and assessments and aid decision making (HM Government, 2018). Research in the 1990s indicated that, on average, between seven and 10 professionals would attend each conference (Gibbons *et al.*, 1995; Hallett, 1995). More recent research by Koprowska (2016), who found that between six and 18 professionals attended the 12 conferences in her study, suggests that the range may be wider. However, attendance by professionals at conferences varies between professions and services. Social workers, who have the lead for child protection enquiries, necessarily attend along with frequent attendance from education professionals and health visitors, whilst there are low levels of attendance from GPs (Farmer & Owen, 1995; Gibbons *et al.*, 1995; Hallett, 1995; Richardson-Foster, 2016; Tompsett *et al.*, 2009). Parents are also usually invited to attend the meeting (or part of the meeting) to contribute their perspectives. Child protection conferences are chaired by an Independent Reviewing Officer who is an experienced social work manager. Although written assessment reports may be circulated before the child protection case conference, it is inherently an interactional event within which the chair facilitates and manages verbal contributions from those who attend.

Child protection conferences are a key site for discussion and decision making in the child protection process. They involve the negotiation, between multiple parties, of understandings of the concerns about neglect (and other types of harm) and of approaches to addressing these concerns. The positioning of children, parents and professionals is interwoven into the discussion of concerns. This research explores

how parents and professionals are involved in and contribute to the negotiation of these understandings about concerns about neglect and versions of events and actions through juxtaposing presence in meetings with active and consequential participation. Consequently, approaches to working with families, such as partnership working or an authoritarian child protection approach, are constructed interactionally through the way that parents and professionals position themselves and are positioned by others as a result of the nature and extent of their participation.

Why child neglect?

As already indicated, this study specifically focuses on child neglect (whilst recognising the co-morbidity of types of maltreatment). Neglect is the most commonly reported type of maltreatment (Department for Education, 2019), currently constituting 47% of child protection plans (Department for Education, 2019). It is also the most common type of harm identified in care proceedings (Masson *et al.*, 2008). Research on self-reported experiences of neglect confirms that more children experience neglect than those that come to the attention of formal services, suggesting that up to 10 per cent of all children have experienced neglect during their childhood (Radford *et al.*, 2011). Moreover, neglect can be a serious form of significant harm that can have life-long consequences for children and young people's health and wellbeing and that can, in extreme cases, be fatal (Brandon *et al.*, 2013; Daniel *et al.*, 2011; Meadows *et al.*, 2011). It also is important to recognise that neglect can be experienced differently for different groups of children and young people. For example, recent research has identified that adolescents have quite specific experiences of neglect that relate to their age (Hicks & Stein, 2015; Raws, 2016; Raws, 2019). Neglect, then, is a significant issue for children and young people and their development and a significant amount of social workers' work is likely to involve children and families where neglect is a concern.

However, whilst child neglect is acknowledged to be a harmful and pervasive form of maltreatment which social workers come across frequently, it also presents challenges for social workers and other professionals in relation to its definition and identification. Child neglect is a contested and contentious concept. It is 'notoriously difficult to define' (Turney, 2005, pg. 249) and is an amorphous and fluid category.

Research has emphasised the heterogeneity of neglect (Dubowitz *et al.*, 1993; Dubowitz *et al.*, 2005). There are many different ways of categorising different types of neglect (Minty & Pattinson, 1994) and it can vary in its severity and the frequency and duration with which it occurs. Dubowitz (2007) argues that neglect exists on a continuum of care ranging from completely inadequate to optimally meeting a child's needs. The point (or 'threshold') on this continuum when less than adequate care becomes concerning is not definitive. Most definitions denote neglect as an omission or failure to provide adequate care for a child or meet their basic needs (Garbarino & Collins, 1999; Horwath, 2007). Yet they differ in the aspects of need covered and the extent to which factors such as responsibility for care, the context in which parenting takes place, the significance of social factors such as disadvantage and the persistence of the failure are emphasised (Horwath, 2007). Some definitions propose a broad perspective on neglect, viewing it as occurring when 'basic needs of children are not met, regardless of cause' (Dubowitz *et al.*, 1993, pg. 12), whereas narrower definitions, such as the statutory definition in Working Together (HM Government, 2018), focus on parental failure to provide specific aspects of care for children (Daniel *et al.*, 2011).

Contributing to the contested nature of neglect is the fact that definitions vary across countries and communities; they vary over time and are considered to be significantly shaped by social factors and values, although the reality of children's lives when they experience harm will always be significant. It has been said that socially defined norms about what is acceptable and adequate care that are embodied in definitions of neglect represent middle class values about child rearing practices (Thorpe, 1994). Additionally, current definitions of neglect are congruent with the idea of childhood as a period of dependency in which a child or young person has needs that must be met in order for them to develop successfully. However, the concept of childhood developed within particular historical conditions and has not always been understood in this way as static and essential (Parton, 1985; Taylor, 2004). Moreover, dominant assumptions about good parenting draw extensively on developmental psychology, which itself is not unproblematic. Objective developmental criteria and children's needs are constructed as intrinsic to the child but involve value judgements (White, 1997; Woodhead, 1997). Notions of child development have also been accused of being Euro-centric and biased towards the

middle classes (Fleer *et al.*, 2009). Yet these norms about care, childhood, parenting and culture that suffuse definitions of neglect are not explicitly scrutinised (Daniel *et al.*, 2011; Horwath, 2013; Tanner & Turney, 2003).

Additionally, child neglect is a contentious concept because of issues related to the attribution of responsibility. It has been argued that neglect as a category of abuse has been particularly susceptible to being shaped by dominant ideas about parenting, what it is considered mothers and fathers should be doing, and who is responsible for deficits (Gupta, 2017; Parton, 1995; Turney, 2000; Turney, 2005). However, whilst the legal framework, policy and guidance do not distinguish between the responsibilities of mothers and fathers, there is a gender dimension. Research suggests that overwhelmingly mothers are identified as ‘perpetrators’ of child neglect (Daniel & Taylor, 2006; Swift, 1995), at least in part because of the connection between mothering and care which has been reinforced by attachment theory and more recently by neuroscientific research (Edwards *et al.*, 2015). Additionally, it is predominantly women who are the focus of intervention intended to improve families’ situations and the well-being of children (Edwards *et al.*, 2015; Farmer & Owen, 1995).

Social and structural factors are also relevant to issues of parental culpability in relation to child neglect. There are established links between neglect, poverty and social deprivation (Bywaters *et al.*, 2018; Bywaters *et al.*, 2016a; Bywaters *et al.*, 2016b; Connell-Carrick, 2003; Gillies, 2014; Spencer & Baldwin, 2005; Thoburn *et al.*, 2000) and attributing responsibility to parents who live in poverty does not acknowledge the often difficult and impoverished circumstances in which parenting (both mothering and fathering) occurs. Consequently, these issues in relation to the conceptualisation and definition of child neglect have implications for how responsibility for child neglect is constructed and the role of the state in terms of how neglect is identified, assessed and responded to.

This thesis focuses specifically on child neglect because issues of parental culpability in relation to neglect are particularly problematic. When social and structural factors and the role of gender are under-acknowledged, women and those who experience adversities are more likely to be responsibilised in relation to neglect

despite the often difficult and impoverished circumstances in which parenting takes place. These issues are rarely the focus of research that considers how concerns about children and parental responsibility are constructed in social work practice (exceptions are Scourfield, 2000; Swift, 1995). This thesis addresses this gap by providing a greater understanding of how neglect is constructed and achieved in situated encounters within the current child protection-focused context, attending to the issues of parental culpability that have been outlined.

Research aims and questions

The overarching aim of this thesis is to explore social work approaches to working with children, parents and families when there are concerns about neglect. Specifically, it explores how these approaches are constructed interactionally. In particular, it focuses on the ways in which relationships between children, parents and the state are constructed in and through interactions in social work practice. It seeks to relate these constructions at the interactional level to the understandings that exist at the broader organisational, political and societal level.

The research has two complementary strands which contribute to addressing the main aim of the research. Firstly, the study explores the approaches to working with children, parents and families that emerge in social workers' accounts of their practice in relation to neglect elicited in interviews and focus groups. Additionally, it explores how children, parents and social workers are positioned in relation to each other and in relation to neglect within these accounts. It considers how these approaches are interactionally negotiated in terms of how any tensions and differences between the approaches are navigated.

Secondly, this research explores the kinds of approaches to working with children, parents and families, including how children, parents and the state are positioned, that are constructed in a critical practice context: the child protection conference. This research specifically focuses on the ways in which parents and professionals are involved in and contribute to the negotiation of understandings about concerns about neglect and versions of events and actions, attending to the nature and extent of their

participation. It also considers the implications of these ways of participation for the construction of the relationship between parents and the state.

Together, these two complementary strands of the research address significant gaps in our knowledge about whether and how broader constructions are translated into situated encounters which has immediate implications for the way in which children, parents and families are positioned in and by dominant ideologies and practices in social work.

Research questions

The detailed research questions are as follows:

- 1. What approaches to understanding and working with children, parents and families are constructed at an interactional level in social workers' accounts of their work involving child neglect?*
- 2. How are relationships between children, parents and the state, in the context of the complexity of neglect, constructed in social worker's accounts of their practice?*
- 3. In relation to the approaches and relationships that are constructed, how do social workers navigate any tensions and differences?*
- 4. Within the specific site of child protection conferences that involve concerns about neglect, what is the nature and extent of parents' and professionals' participation in the interaction?*
- 5. What are the implications of ways of participating in child protection conferences for how the roles and responsibilities of parents and professionals are understood?*
- 6. How are approaches to working with children, parents and families that are constructed at the interactional level of social work practice connected to the broader organisational, political and societal context?*

The first, second and third research questions are addressed in Chapter 4. The analysis of the child protection conferences in Chapter 5 addresses the fourth and fifth research questions. Research question six is explored in both analytic chapters and is returned to in greater depth in Chapter 6.

Thesis outline

This thesis comprises six chapters. The first literature chapter (Chapter 1) provides an orientation to the wider social, political and legislative context for child protection work in England. It presents an overview of major developments in child protection policies and practices from the post-war period until the present day. It evaluates the social and historical conditions which have shaped changes in the way that child abuse and specifically neglect are understood, in how systems of protection are organised and in the relationships between children, parents and the state. Additionally, informed by an historical evaluation, this chapter considers how the key tensions inherent in contemporary child protection systems and practices are particularly problematic in relation to the issue of child neglect.

Relevant to an analysis of how approaches to working with children, parents and families are constructed in practice context, Chapter 2 explores relevant literature on participation in child protection (including in child protection conferences). It then applies a closer focus to the interactional accomplishment of participation in meetings. In doing this it discusses the relevant literature that identifies the different ways that professionals and parents are involved in child protection conferences and other child welfare meetings. It also establishes the conceptualisation of participation that informs this study, drawing on research on turn taking, the actions accomplished by turns and how turns are responded to by others. Additionally, it examines literature that demonstrates that the nature of interactants' participation in meetings is connected to how roles, status, power, expertise and responsibilities are enacted and negotiated interactionally. These two chapters establish the rationale for the research questions that have been proposed and addressed in this thesis.

The methodological considerations that informed the study are detailed in Chapter 3. This chapter outlines the social constructionist perspective from which this research was conducted. It then describes the research design and data collection procedures that were employed in this research and identifies the limitations in relation to the data collected. This chapter also discusses the ethical aspects of the research and reflects on my position in the research. The interactional sociolinguistic approach

that informed the data analysis is also described before I then consider issues of quality in qualitative research.

Consistent with the two complementary strands of the research, there are two analytic chapters which present the study findings. The first findings chapter (Chapter 4) explores social workers' accounts of their practice obtained through interviews and focus groups. This chapter considers how children, parents and social workers are positioned in relation to neglect within the ideals of social work with children and families that were identified in the analysis. It also explores how any tensions and differences between these ideals and associated ways of positioning children, parents and social workers are navigated and identifies regularities in the way that these ideals are prioritised and ordered.

Chapter 5 explores the nature and extent of parents' and professionals' participation in the interaction in child protection conferences that involve concerns about neglect. Informed by the analysis of the data, it proposes a model which conceptualises the conditions for effective participation and relates this model to the participative activities of parents and professionals. In doing this, it facilitates an understanding of how parents and professionals position themselves and are positioned by others in child protection conferences and how this relates to broader approaches to working with parents and families.

The final chapter synthesises the key findings of this interdisciplinary research and considers the ways in which these findings respond to the research questions. It also discusses the contributions this research makes to the relevant areas of scholarship. This chapter includes a discussion of the implications of the findings for social work policy and practice and a discussion of possibilities for future research.

Chapter 1: Understanding contemporary child protection systems and practices

The landscape of child protection policy and practice is continually shifting and moves in different directions as different factors predominate (Parton, 2014). In order to understand contemporary child protection systems and practices in general and in relation to child neglect in particular, it is essential to evaluate the historical and social conditions that shape understandings, definitions and responses to child maltreatment. What happens in today's child protection system in England, with its current orientation towards child protection, has been influenced by a number of sometimes contradictory and often contentious factors with earlier roots. This chapter provides an overview of major developments in child protection policies and practices from the post-war period until the present day. It attends to the social, political and legislative contexts which have shaped changes in the way that child abuse and neglect are understood, in how systems of protection are organised and in the relationships between children, parents and the state. In evaluating the significance of these factors, the chapter also considers key tensions and debates in child protection policy and practice that have evolved, developed and shifted within different historical periods. For example, debates about the most appropriate combination of child protection and family support have persisted over time resulting in subtle shifts between the different orientations. These debates are particularly relevant in the current climate which has seen a significant retrenchment of family support services due to a combination of austerity policies, the political context and an orientation towards child protection. Debates and tensions in child protection policy and practice frequently involve different ways of constituting the relationship between the family and the state and these differing settlements are considered throughout this chapter. Additionally, informed by an historical evaluation, this chapter considers how the key tensions inherent in contemporary child protection systems and practices are particularly problematic in relation to the issue of child neglect, a form of child maltreatment that has been recognised as contested and complex to define and has been identified as particularly problematic to work with in practice (Farmer & Lutman, 2012; Parton, 1995; Stevenson, 2007).

This chapter first provides an orientation to the wider social, political and legislative context for child protection work and considers broader conceptualisations of approaches to working with children, parents and families which position children, parents and the state. In doing so, it sets the scene for the research and shows how dominant ideologies emerge, circulate and become ideals enacted in situated practice as Chapters 5 and 6 will show. In line with the overarching focus of this thesis, this chapter then appraises the current evidence base in relation to the approaches to working with children, parents and families when there are concerns about neglect that are constructed at an interactional level. This consideration of the limited existing research sheds some light on the kinds of approaches to working with children, parents and families that are constructed in and through interaction and establishes the opportunities for furthering our understanding of this area. This chapter, together with the next, provides the rationale for the research questions that have been proposed and addressed in this thesis.

The post-war period, the ‘rediscovery’ of child abuse and the genesis of the Children Act 1989

In the period following the Second World War there were significant changes in the way that child welfare services were organised and delivered (Parton, 2014). The evacuation of children during the war had resulted in a greater awareness of the impoverished circumstances in which many children lived coupled with concerns about the psychological impact on children of being separated from their families (Parton, 1985). The Curtis report (1946) into children’s out-of-home was critical of the standards of care children received and highlighted the detrimental effect of institutionalisation on children. Consequently, in relation to families, there was a focus on improving living conditions and welfare and on the centrality of the family (in which mothers were positioned as responsible for child-rearing). Maintaining children in their families, or a family environment (e.g. fostering or adoption), was emphasised, contrasting with the earlier dominance of a rescue approach (Parton, 1985).

In the wake of the Beveridge report (1942), the development of a fully integrated system of welfare commenced, premised on universal services with the purpose of

maximising welfare (Bamford, 2015; Payne, 2005). This included children's departments, established by the 1948 Children Act, that unified the childcare functions of other departments, later followed by a 'family service' (Pierson, 2011). Initially, the focus of children's departments was on children who had been received into care. However, it became apparent, supported by an increasing awareness of the impact on children and families of poor family functioning, poverty, crime and delinquency (Hendrick, 2003), that this was too narrow and there was a need to work with families in order to prevent children from coming into care (Pierson, 2011). Children's departments began doing preventative work with families which was later supported by statute (Children and Young Persons Act 1963). This Act made provision for advice, guidance and assistance (including material and financial) to be provided to families in the community in order to prevent children from coming in to care and reduce potential future problems (Corby *et al.*, 2012; Parton, 2006). This post-war period also saw the development of the profession of social work with the establishment of the first training courses (Payne, 2005).

The core of practice during this post-war period involved casework with families that had therapeutic underpinnings (Pierson, 2011). There were influences on practice from, for example, psychoanalytic theorising and attachment theory (Corby *et al.*, 2012). The work involved offering practical, social, psychological and emotional support to children and families to effect change and ensure that the family environment and circumstances were an appropriate place for children to develop (Parton *et al.*, 1997). Thus, support was provided for families to help them care for their children at home emphasising the importance of the family and of a family support approach. However, whilst social workers' involvement with families was often seen to be a form of relatively benign paternalism (Ferguson, 2004; Parton, 1985), involving working with families on a voluntary basis where possible, the work still, it is argued, concerned significant regulation, monitoring and intervention into family life (Corby *et al.*, 2012; Donzelot, 1997; Parton, 1985). Moreover, local authorities did remove children from the care of their parents when there were significant concerns about child abuse and neglect, an action which did not require court permission even if the parents did not consent (Bullock & Parker, 2017). Therefore, a supportive and helping relationship between the social worker and the

family was key to the way that social workers worked with families but there was also an interventionist character to the work.

At the same time as the establishment of a new child welfare service was being laid down in this post-war period the concept of child abuse emerged and began to be both researched and theorised. Prior to this, child abuse as a social problem was not recognised. Modern awareness of child abuse is attributed to the ‘discovery’ of ‘battered baby syndrome’ in the 1960s in the US (Parton, 2006; Taylor, 2009). The paediatrician Henry Kempe and his medical colleagues were able to ‘diagnose’ the problem of physical abuse in infants as a clinical condition aided by developments in medical science such as x-rays that provided for the first time convincing evidence of physical abuse (Kempe *et al.*, 1962). The dominant understanding was of child abuse as a ‘disease’ and parents as ‘dangerous’ because of an underlying pathology (Kempe *et al.*, 1962; Parton *et al.*, 1997); child maltreatment was considered to be a medico-scientific problem and the role of the state was to prevent and cure it by identifying ‘signs’ and ‘symptoms’ (Otway, 1996). However, whilst parents were identified as the problem, they were not seen as wholly responsible for their situation. The impact of previous social and emotional deprivations on parents was considered highly significant, particularly the intergenerational transmission of abuse (Kempe *et al.*, 1962). The predominant response, emphasised by the work of the NSPCC Battered Child Research Unit, was therapeutic work with the parents (usually the mother) (Corby *et al.*, 2012; Howe, 1992; Parton, 1985). The original notion of the ‘battered baby syndrome’ which concerned the physical abuse of young children, quickly widened to concern about ‘non-accidental injury’ to all children (DHSS, 1974) and was later reframed as ‘child abuse’ which comprised physical injury, physical neglect, failure to thrive and emotional abuse (DHSS, 1980). Subsequent expansion of the definition of child abuse to include sexual abuse took place in the late 1980s (DHSS, 1988).

However, this way of understanding child abuse and the psychosocial theories that suffused casework were increasingly challenged as inappropriately individualising problems and failing to take account of research about wider structural factors such as poverty, power and inequality that can impact significantly on families, on parenting and on child development (see for example Parton, 1985). An increasing

critical awareness of discrimination and social inequalities was articulated by the radical social work movement in the 1970s (Bailey & Brake, 1975; Ferguson, 2011). Initially, radical social work focused on class differences as a source of inequality (Corrigan & Leonard, 1978). Later the focus widened to include oppression of women, minority ethnic groups, disabled people and LGBTQ+ people as result of the influences of feminism (Dominelli & McLeod, 1989), anti-racist social work and the disability movement (Bamford, 2015). The inception and continuous development of these critical approaches have continued to the strong presence of anti-oppressive research, theorising and practice which is part of mainstream practice today (Dalrymple & Burke, 2006; Thompson, 2016).

At a pragmatic level, other concerns coalesced during the 1970s and 1980s. There was increasing concern that the system of child protection was not operating effectively. A series of more than 30 child abuse inquiries during this period, starting with the 1974 inquiry into the death of Maria Colwell, highlighted that children did not appear to have been protected by state intervention (Reder *et al.*, 1993). All of the inquiries involved children who had died because of physical abuse and neglect and they had often also experienced emotional neglect and failure to thrive (Otway, 1996). The general picture that emerged from the inquiries was that professionals had failed to protect the children mainly because they had not used their authority and statutory powers (Parton, 2006). However, it was not individual professionals who were blamed, the focus was on improving the child protection system (Otway, 1996). Failures in inter-professional and inter-agency communication were almost invariably specifically identified, as was the need to improve the identification of child abuse (Howe, 1992). Consequently, a new system of child abuse management was developed in the 1970s and later refined that focused on familiarising professionals with the signs of child abuse and improving information sharing (Bamford, 2015). Area review committees (later area child protection committees), case conferences and registers of children considered to have experienced non-accidental injury were established (Pierson, 2011). In 1988, the first version of the government guidance *Working Together* (Home Office *et al.*, 1991) was published which set out prescriptions for effective interprofessional working. In the same year a structured assessment framework for assessing and planning interventions in instances of child abuse and neglect was published (which became known at the

Orange Book) which established a more structured and systematic framework for assessment (Department of Health, 1988).

Over time, it can be argued, the child protection system became increasingly preoccupied with risk and risk assessment. Prior to the 1970s the concept of risk as something to be reduced and managed did not exist in post-war child welfare work (Munro, 2010). However, the upshot of the child abuse inquiries during the 1970s and 1980s was an increasing focus on the identification of risk (Munro, 2010) and particularly 'high risk' individuals and situations (Parton, 2010; Parton *et al.*, 1997). Child protection work took on a more predictive, investigative and intervention-led tenet (Parton, 2006). Therefore, during this period prior to the Children Act 1989, parents had become increasingly understood as a potential source of risk to children rather than as the principal means of ensuring their welfare. The state's role had become increasingly authoritative rather than primarily being focused on support.

Whilst the majority of the child abuse inquiries during the 1970s and 1980s led to concerns about how effective the system was at protecting children, there were also concerns that the rights of families to privacy were not being upheld. One driver for these concerns was the investigation into sexual abuse in Cleveland in the late 1980s. More than a hundred children were removed from home, against their parents' wishes, as a result of what were subsequently regarded as questionable diagnoses of sexual abuse by medical professionals (Pierson, 2011). This inquiry was highly significant because the dominance of medical science was questioned, perhaps for the first time. The disregard of parental rights and the harmful impact of repeated and/or intrusive medical examinations on children was also particularly concerning (Parton *et al.*, 1997). In addition to the concerns emanating from Cleveland, campaign groups for parents' and children's rights and a civil liberties critique led to a questioning of the legitimacy of state intervention into private family lives (Parton, 2006). Consequently, questions were raised about whether an appropriate balance had been achieved between protecting children and protecting family privacy.

The Children Act 1989 and the ‘refocusing’ debate

The issues articulated by the failures of the system to protect children on the one hand and the intrusive intervention into family life on the other hand led to the need for a re-specification of the relationship between the state and the family. It was argued that a greater focus on legalism was needed, with rationales for intervention being made explicit and stated action needed to be accountable (Parton, 2006). However, whilst the child abuse inquiries did influence the development of the Children Act 1989, much of the work of developing the Act had taken place before the later inquiries. This development work was informed by reports such as the Short Report (Short Report, 1984) and the Review of Child Care Law (DHSS, 1985) which confirmed the anachronistic nature of some existing child welfare legislation and the need for consolidation.

The Children Act 1989 (with its unprecedented accompanying volumes of guidance) attempted to redress the balance between protecting children and protecting family privacy and remains a central piece of legislation today. It not only provides a mandate for protecting children from harm but includes responsibilities for children in need (including children with disabilities) and working with families based on the principles of negotiation and partnership (Parton, 2006). The Act was a watershed in child care policy, including for the following reasons: the definition of children in need under section 17(10); the emphasis it placed on prevention and services for children in need to support families such as child care provision, recreational activities, respite and financial assistance; its emphasis on children’s needs being paramount in all proceedings under the Act; its focus on negotiation and partnership with parents; and the new threshold criteria of significant harm which included provision for the likelihood of harm in the future (Parton, 2014). Thus, in theory, there was a broadening of the role of the state because of the wider understanding of prevention but also because of the need to attempt to predict the risk of future harm (Parton, 2014). The Children Act resulted in a significant shift away from a socio-medical model in the UK towards a socio-legal system. Children were to be protected from ‘significant harm’ within a legal framework which framed how child abuse and neglect were to be understood. A revised version of Working Together was published in 1991 to coincide with the implementation of the Children Act

1989. As with all pieces of legislation, the Children Act 1989 provides a benchmark of practice that social work professionals orient to. This is enacted in the daily reality of professionals as is shown in this research.

Despite the Children Act 1989's emphasis on the balance between support and intervention, after a short period of time it became apparent that there was a lack of attention to the preventative and supportive work with families where children were identified as 'in need' (Parton, 2014). Whilst a local authority could make provision for support services for children in need and their families, it was not mandated to do so and there was no additional central government funding for this provision. Therefore, this attempt to shift the balance in the relationship between the state and the family back towards the state performing a supportive role was not initially successful. The identification of 'high risk' was found to prevail and there was concern that the system was too heavy handed. Too many families were subject to intrusive investigations who did not require protective intervention as the majority of cases were filtered out of the child protection system at various points without provision of services (Gibbons *et al.*, 1995; Wattam, 1997). These conclusions were supported by the findings from 20 important research studies into child protection practice which were summarised in *Child Protection: Messages from Research* (Department of Health, 1995). The research studies also revealed that there was not extensive involvement of parents in the child protection process and that much more could be done to work in partnership with parents (Department of Health, 1995). Moreover, families involved in the child protection system could feel stigmatised and experience investigations as traumatic (Farmer & Owen, 1995; Thoburn *et al.*, 1995). These concerns about how the principles of the Act were being implemented in practice led to a subsequent emphasis on the 'refocusing' of children's services in the mid-1990s to integrate broader aspects of family support and children in need alongside child protection (Lonne *et al.*, 2009). These approaches of child protection, family support and partnership which were particularly debated during 1990s are evident in the social workers' accounts analysed in Chapter 4.

New Labour and a broader focus

The election of a new Labour government in 1997 brought about a change in political ideology and a broadening understanding of what might cause harm to children. New Labour continued the previous Conservative government's focus on individualism but steered a subtly different course to the free market economics of the Conservatives (Featherstone *et al.*, 2014b). The New Labour project emphasised the 'social investment state' in which the aim of social investment was to reduce demand on the welfare state but also, most significantly, to increase the economic productivity of citizens (Dobrowoksky & Lister, 2008). Investment in services such as health, welfare and education was seen as a way of realising the future economic and social engagement of the population (Fawcett *et al.*, 2004). Whilst there was investment in services that addressed the needs of all sections of the population, children were a particular focus for investment:

This was a future-oriented and child-focused project: spending could be legitimately directed to supporting and educating children *especially in their early years* because they hold the promise of the future (Featherstone *et al.*, 2014b, pg. 25, emphasis in original).

As a consequence of the focus on social investment and the particular emphasis on children as deserving beneficiaries, prevention and early intervention were prioritised. Interest grew in the identification of risk and protective factors which informed policy and the development of services and initiatives (Morris, 2005). One of the flagship services focused on investing early in children and families was the Sure Start programme aimed at children under four. Sure Start centres were set up in local areas, initially in those with high indices of deprivation. They were an accessible way of giving children, especially the most disadvantaged, the best start in life by providing supportive and advice services (Eisenstadt, 2011). There was considerable scope for Sure Start services to be locally designed with the involvement of stakeholders, including local parents (Eisenstadt, 2011). However, the programme was plagued with uncertainties about long-term funding and there were mixed research findings about its effectiveness (Eisenstadt, 2011; Glass, 2006).

Placing children and childhood at the centre of New Labour policies to reshape the welfare state meant that a new position for children was created. Instead of being understood as located within families, children were defined as innocent and deserving of opportunities but it was their futures as active citizens that was of prime concern (Lister, 2006). This policy focus on securing children's futures contained within it an emphasis on the role of parents in ensuring their children's current and future welfare, commensurate with New Labour's focus on active citizenship. Thus, family life and what happens within families moved from the private to the public sphere (Gillies, 2014), with parenting becoming a political concern (Featherstone *et al.*, 2014b). The state would provide support but would function as an enabler by removing obstacles to action and empowering parents to help themselves out of poverty and social exclusion with a heavy emphasis on employment as the route out (Featherstone *et al.*, 2014b; Parton, 2014). This has implications for the way that parenting is constructed. Parents have a 'job' to do and can improve how well they do this job (and enhance outcomes for their children) by boosting their parenting skills and techniques (Holt & Kelly, 2016), skills which are normative and culturally specific (Gillies, 2005). This responsibilisation of parents and parenting suffused policy documents such as Supporting Families (Home Office, 1998).

Following the concerns about how the Children Act 1989 was being implemented and the subsequent 'refocusing' debate, New Labour's approach was to establish a broader remit for children's services by relocating child protection within the wider project of safeguarding children and promoting their welfare, not just protecting them from significant harm (Parton, 2014). This policy shift from 'child protection' to 'safeguarding' was reflected in official guidance (Department of Health, 1999). Also reflective of New Labour's broader approach to children's well-being was the introduction of the Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families (Department of Health *et al.*, 2000). It replaced the Orange Book (Department of Health, 1988) which was increasingly criticised for its technical rationality, intrusive questions, pathologizing focus and moral biases (Howe, 1992). The Assessment Framework was issued as guidance which meant it had to be followed by local authorities and was published alongside a revised edition of Working Together; the two documents were to be read and used together (Parton, 2014). This was an attempt to move the focus of assessment away from an almost

exclusive focus on the risk of child abuse and neglect and significant harm towards an approach that conceptualised child maltreatment and the welfare of children within the context of an array of factors that compromise parenting and children's well-being (Parton, 2006). It was informed by the ecological perspective which approaches child abuse and neglect as a complex interplay of individual and family factors, social structures and conditions, and broad ideological and cultural beliefs (Belsky, 1980; Garbarino, 1977; Garbarino & Collins, 1999). Conceptually and pictorially the child was placed at the centre. The Assessment Framework was intended as a way of assessing the needs of all children using a common schema regardless of whether they were 'in need' or at risk of significant harm as defined by the Children Act 1989.

This broader view of children's well-being also underpinned the Every Child Matters agenda (Chief Secretary to the Treasury, 2003; Department for Education and Skills, 2004). Every Child Matters was the first policy document of any kind that was aspirational and identified desired outcomes for every child. It reflected an area of policy which focused on the influence of the wider circumstances in which children grow up and specified that children's needs were central. Every Child Matters particularly highlighted New Labour's focus on the early identification of children who were at risk of poor outcomes as opposed to just responding to child abuse and neglect (Kirton, 2009). Thus, the problem of child abuse and neglect was located within the wider project of improving the well-being of all children. This change was indicative of the particular approach of New Labour to improving the life chances of children rather than focusing on the family unit as the cornerstone of society given the extensive changes to the nature and structure of families during recent decades (Parton, 2011). There was also increasing recognition of the risks to children from witnessing domestic violence and organised sexual abuse. As a consequence of this focus on improving the life chances of all children, the well-being of children and protecting children became the business of all professionals working with children (Department for Children Schools and Families, 2007). However, whilst children's services were now involved with a much larger proportion of the population because of this broader remit, the core of their work still involved child protection and it was social workers who continued to play a key role in decision-making about whether children were being kept safe (Parton, 2014).

Whilst New Labour had embarked on an ambitious project of social reform during its period in power, there were sadly two tragedies that significantly influenced policy development. Firstly, the death of Victoria Climbié aged 8 years old in 2001 at the hands of her aunt and aunt's boyfriend demonstrated that, like the public inquiries in the 1970s and 1980s, failures in the system contributed to her death. Victoria was known to several social services departments and to other health and welfare services, yet she died of extreme neglect and violence towards her. The findings of the Laming report (2003) into her death were strikingly similar to previous inquiries, although there were some notable differences. For example, Laming identified that there were misplaced assumptions about Victoria's cultural circumstances resulting in multiple failures to protect her (Laming Report, 2003). Echoing previous enquiries, the report found that there were significant problems with inter-agency communication, professional accountability and systems for recording information about service users. The report included 108 recommendations to overhaul child protection (Laming Report, 2003). In response, the government embarked on a programme of reform for children's services which included the introduction of a Common Assessment Framework for use by any professional involved with children, a renewed emphasis on sharing information, the Integrated Children's System (an electronic case management and recording system) and the introduction of Local Safeguarding Children Boards (Department for Education and Skills, 2004; Parton, 2014). The Laming report also informed the development of the Every Child Matters programme (see earlier). These reforms were enacted under the Children Act 2004 which aimed to increase professional accountability and to encourage partnership between a wide range of agencies from areas of health, welfare, education and criminal justice. In addition, Working Together was revised in 2006 to take account of these changes and incorporate the principles of Every Child Matters.

As well as a focus on increasing inter-agency working and accountability, in the context of a political focus on New Public Management (Munro, 2004; Parton, 2014), the regulation and monitoring of professional practice in social work increased significantly in the 1990s and 2000s. Consequently, child protection social work became subject to a range of targets, performance indicators and inspections

(which necessarily had a quantitative focus). Thus, the complexity of the problem of safeguarding children was not recognised and instead the system was subjected to a series of technical fixes. The 2000s also saw the increasing professionalisation of social work. Statutory regulation of social work began in 2001 with the establishment of the General Social Care Council (Bamford, 2015). Further improvement and reform resulted from the establishment of the Social Work Task Force in 2008 whose recommendations were implemented by the Social Work Reform Board (Bamford, 2015).

The second significant tragedy during New Labour's period in power was the death of baby Peter Connolly in 2007. Peter died aged 17 months as a result of horrific injuries and his mother (who engaged in extensive deception of professionals), his mother's boyfriend and the boyfriend's brother were convicted of causing or allowing his death. Peter was not protected despite being the subject of a child protection plan and being seen by numerous health and social work professionals. Laming's report (2009) on the failures in the case generally endorsed the changes that had been made following his previous report into the death of Victoria Climbié. However, it called for a greater focus on child protection which he felt had not been given sufficient priority (Laming Report, 2009). Interestingly, both Laming's report and the subsequent government response used the words 'child protection' in their titles rather than 'safeguarding'. This reinforcement of the importance of child protection after a period in which a broader approach to children's welfare had been adopted has been termed the rediscovery of child protection (Parton, 2011). At the same time as this renewed focus on child protection, it was becoming apparent that reforms to the system over the past 10 years, particularly those involving targets, timescales and standardisation were not impacting on social work in a positive way. For example, ICT systems intended as helpful tools had the effect of increasing bureaucracy and did not reduce risk (Pithouse *et al.*, 2012); rather, in the context of resource constraints, they heightened the possibility of error (Broadhurst *et al.*, 2010; White *et al.*, 2010). It has been argued that bureaucracy and proceduralisation have impacted on social work practice as workers have less time to focus on building relationship with children, families and other professionals, and have limited space to think analytically and reflect on their practice (Featherstone *et al.*, 2014b).

The New Labour era is characterised by policies and practices that have a greater child-focused orientation (Gilbert *et al.*, 2011). This orientation borrows from the child protection and family service orientations identified by Lonne and colleagues (2009) and that are represented, to varying degrees, in earlier periods. In this child-focused orientation, the focus is on the child's well-being rather than narrowly focusing on concerns about child abuse and neglect and the state's role is extended to provide a range of preventative and early intervention services. The child is viewed as an individual with an independent relationship to the state and less attention is given to children's relationships with their family and community (Featherstone *et al.*, 2014b). As a result of the way that children and childhood is understood, parents and parenting become instrumentalised. Parents are ascribed responsibilities which they need to fulfil to ensure their children's current and future welfare. The state provides support services to help parents; Sure Start was one of the key examples of the wide ranging support services that supported families. However, conceptualising parenting as a 'job' results in a reduced focus on the relational strengths of families and communities (Featherstone *et al.*, 2014b). Additionally, whilst there is considerable emphasis on support services, the state can intervene in an authoritarian way if parents do not fulfil their responsibilities.

The coalition government to the present day: The impact of austerity and a return to child protection

A coalition government comprised of the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats came to power in May 2010. They embarked on a programme of significant cost-cutting in order to reduce the country's debt and stimulate economic growth, in contrast to the considerable spending under New Labour (Featherstone *et al.*, 2014b). The coalition's approach was underpinned by a desire to reduce the role of the state, reduce bureaucracy, reduce dependency on the welfare state and extend market principles into state provision (Parton, 2014). There was also an associated emphasis on increasing the responsibility of individuals. However, the role of the state in relation to individuals who do not fulfil their 'responsibilities', particularly with regard to being part of the workforce, has become much more coercive and muscular (Parton, 2014). For example, there is a focus on getting people back into work, even those who are sick or disabled who face very restrictive criteria for eligibility for

disability benefits, certain benefits come with conditions that have to be adhered to otherwise the claimant is sanctioned (has their benefits reduced or removed), benefit caps limit the total amount of income from certain benefits a household can receive, the bedroom tax results in a reduction of housing benefit if a property is deemed to have spare bedrooms and a two-child limit on additional payments for certain tax credits (Department for Work and Pensions, 2015). This emphasis on the exercise of the power of the state in relation to the responsibilities of individuals is indicative of wider discourses about 'broken society' and 'strivers and skivers' promoted by the coalition government (Parton, 2014).

There have been significant cuts to public expenditure since the coalition government took office in 2010 which have intensified under the current Conservative government. However, these cuts have not been equally distributed across all sectors of society; the most deprived local authorities have experienced the greatest cuts (Webb & Bywaters, 2018). Moreover, these cuts have had a particular impact on children and families and the services that they use, suggesting that families with children and young people are not regarded as a prime concern, contrasting with the position of New Labour (Parton, 2014). Households with children have been particularly affected by funding reforms compared to adult-only households, with the poorest households with children being affected the most (Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2013). As well as affecting children and families, the cuts have also particularly affected groups who are more likely to experience oppression such as women, (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2018; Women's Budget Group, 2019), which runs counter to the principles of social justice and anti-oppressive practice. Austerity has also affected the provision of services. There have been cuts to children's services and early intervention provision and significantly to youth services (Action for Children *et al.*, 2016; Parton, 2014; UNISON Local Government, 2016). The voluntary sector, which is involved in the provision of some family support services and which often relies on local and central government for funding, has been particularly hard hit (National Children's Bureau, 2012).

In addition to cuts to services for children and families, there have also been changes to the focus of policies and services for this group. Firstly, the coalition government,

like New Labour, emphasised the importance of early intervention. However, under the coalition government, the Every Child Matters initiative was dropped and the focus of early intervention shifted to include not only problems in their early stages but also in the early years of children's lives which are said to be crucial for later outcomes. This agenda was supported by the Allen report which emphasised the apparent link between poor early experiences and damage to infant brains (Allen, 2011). In this report parents are explicitly blamed for the significant effects on young children's brains of the 'wrong type of parenting' (Allen, 2011 pg. xiii). The timing of intervention was thought to be significant as other research emphasised the need to act within a child's 'timeframe' for fear of missing a crucial window for improving outcomes (Brown & Ward, 2012). Understanding children's poor early experiences in this way determines the focus of intervention. Parents, particularly those who are poor, are provided with opportunities to receive education, training or support with their parenting. However, these 'now or never' arguments (Munro, 2011b) which support early intervention and swift removal rely heavily on neuroscientific evidence which others have argued is insufficient to support such a policy stance and is not practice ready (Wastell & White, 2012). Critics such as Wastell and White (2012) contend that the brain actually has a remarkable ability for plasticity and resilience rendering this deterministic view of the long-term negative effects of experiencing abuse and neglect in early childhood problematic. It is also argued that attributing sole responsibility to parents for their children's brain development ignores gendered, racial and social inequalities (Edwards *et al.*, 2015).

This construction of families as problematic and poor parenting as the cause of social problems can also be found in the discourse of 'troubled families'. Families with complex needs are targeted for support in the Troubled Families programme introduced in 2011 (Wills *et al.*, 2017). This was an approach that built on New Labour's initiatives intended to tackle anti-social behaviour. Whilst couched in the language of support, these programmes have a harder edge; sanctions for parents are invoked if they fail to comply with what is required of them. Thus, parents are held responsible for the problems caused by 'troubled families' and have an obligation to address them (Gillies, 2014). The moral undercurrent of this programme is also concerning; it is argued that 'troubled families' is merely a recycling of the historical concept of an underclass (Wills *et al.*, 2017). Despite initially positive reports on the

programme by the government, there are mixed findings from evaluation research which showed that there were improvements in families' circumstances as a result of the programme (Blades *et al.*, 2016; Thoburn *et al.*, 2013), but it has not been possible to confirm whether the Troubled Families programme had any significant or sustained impact (Day *et al.*, 2016).

In addition to an increasingly muscular approach towards families encapsulated in wider policies relating to children and families, children's social care has become increasingly orientated towards child protection, a trajectory that began under New Labour following the death of baby Peter. The Munro Review of Child Protection, commissioned following the criticisms of child protection policy and practice in the wake of the inquiry into the death of baby Peter and produced in three parts during 2010 and 2011, confirmed child protection as a core governmental concern. It concluded that child protection services had become over-bureaucratized, focused on compliance and that there had been a concomitant reduction in professional discretion in social work (Munro, 2004; Munro, 2010; Munro, 2011a; Munro, 2011b). Munro (2011) argued for a child-focused system that values professional expertise and gives social workers the freedom to exercise professional judgement by reducing statutory guidance and affording more scope for professional and local autonomy. Training was viewed as being a significant contributor to improving the authority and practice of social workers. Some changes are evident such as the streamlining of Working Together, the combining of the initial and core assessments and provisions for greater regulation and oversight of the professional and professional education introduced by the Children and Social Work Act 2017. However, there continue to be concerns about the extent to which a risk-averse approach pervades social work's response to families (Featherstone *et al.*, 2018). Additionally, whilst there is an increasing recognition of the value of strengths-based and systemic models of practice, including Signs of Safety (Turnell, 2012), in terms of enabling collaborative relationships between professionals and families (Baginsky *et al.*, 2017), there are questions about the extent to which these ways of working with families address power and structural issues at a contextual level (Kedell, 2014). A recent scoping review suggests that there is little evidence that such approaches translate into better outcomes for children and young people in terms of the need to (re)enter care and the likelihood of reunification (What Works Centre for

Children's Social Care, 2018). These approaches have so far been unsuccessful in significantly attenuating the current pervasive focus on risk.

Research has demonstrated that the social work response to families is dominated by an investigative approach and that demand on statutory services has increased. This is likely to be because of funding cuts to preventative and family support services and the effects of increased economic hardship on families (Hood *et al.*, 2020). Using national statistics and data from local authorities in England gained from a Freedom of Information request, Bilson and Martin (2017) found a 79.4 per cent increase in child protection investigations between 2009–10 and 2014–15. Although the number of children subject to a child protection plan also rose during the same time period, the rate of increase was much slower. Consequently, the number of children who were subject to an investigation but were not found to be significantly harmed more than doubled from 45,000 to 98,000 in the five-year period. They also found that 22.5% of a cohort of 0.5 million children born in the 2009/10 financial year were referred to children's services before their fifth birthday and a quarter of these were formally investigated (one in every 19 children). Further analysis of changes over time using subsequent datasets obtained in the same way shows increases in the number and rate of children involved in most levels of the child protection system (the number and rate of looked after children is an exception to this) and an increase in unfounded or unsubstantiated investigations (Bilson & Munro, 2019). These findings echo the concerns raised by research in the 1990s following the implementation of the Children Act 1989. The latest safeguarding pressures research carried out by the Association of Directors of Children's Services also confirms an increase in demand across all aspects of children's social care at the same time as a reduction in resources (Association of the Directors of Children's Services, 2018). For example, referrals to children's social care have increased by 22% between 2008 and 2018, section 47 enquiries have increased by 159% in the same period, the number of children subject to a child protection plan has increased by 87% between 2008 and 2018 and the number of looked after children has increased by 24% in the same period. Statistics from CAFCASS also show a rise in the number of applications for care proceedings between 2014 and 2017, with the rate of applications stabilising after this (CAFCASS, 2018). These figures confirm the investigative approach of the current child protection system. The number of

children and families drawn into the system is ever increasing, but the increasing rate of unfounded investigations raises questions about whether families' identified needs are being responded to by the provision of appropriate services. Moreover, there is no additional workforce capacity to deal with this increased demand which has resulted in ever increasing pressures on social workers (BASW, 2013). Research also identifies that socio-economic disadvantage is a powerful factor in explaining inequalities in child welfare intervention (Bywaters *et al.*, 2016a; Bywaters *et al.*, 2016b). These child welfare inequalities and the apparent lack of priority given in addressing them contrasts with anti-oppressive principles.

An authoritarian approach to intervention is also evident in the coalition and Conservative governments' prioritisation of adoption for looked after children and young people. New Labour were keen to promote adoption as a response to concerns about delays in decision-making about permanency (Performance and Innovation Unit, 2000) and introduced changes to the process in the Adoption and Children Act 2002. This Act aimed to accelerate the process, increase the pool of prospective adopters by allowing adoption by unmarried and same sex couples, improve adoption support services and ensure that practitioners focused on permanence planning for children including the serious consideration of adoption (Kirton, 2013). The coalition government maintained this strong interest in adoption and quickly embarked on an adoption reform programme with the aim of speeding up the process of adoption which it believed was still being impacted by delays (Department for Education, 2012). Whilst the New Labour and coalition governments wanted to promote adoption, the Conservative government imposed much more stringent timescales and removed perceived barriers to adoption in order to make the process easier (Kirton, 2013). Moreover, the coalition government particularly emphasised the benefits of removing children from home for children who had experienced neglect and abuse (Department for Education, 2012), reflecting, in part, increasing emphasis on early intervention. However, whilst the number of children adopted each year initially rose and peaked in 2015, it has since fallen continuously and was 3,570 in 2019 (Department for Education, 2020).

This prioritisation of adoption is part of a broader discourse of 'child rescue' in which families and parents are perceived as risky and children as vulnerable and in

need of rescue. This discourse can be traced throughout the history of child welfare provision (Parton, 1985). Consequently, removing more children from their parents is advocated coupled with making earlier and quicker decisions supported by a renaissance in attachment theory and developments in neuroscience. This discourse of child rescue is evident in policy and political rhetoric. The 2013 and 2015 versions of Working Together contrast the riskiness of adults with the vulnerability of children: ‘A desire to think the best of adults and to hope they can overcome their difficulties should not trump the need to rescue children from chaotic, neglectful and abusive homes’ (HM Government, 2015, pg. 24). The word rescue has been removed from the 2018 version but the contrast between parents who pose a risk and vulnerable children remains (HM Government, 2018) and, it is argued, fundamentally undermines partnership working (Holt & Kelly, 2018). This ideology of child rescue was advocated by the former education secretary Michael Gove in his speech to the NSPCC (2013):

In all too many cases when we decide to leave children in need with their biological parents we are leaving them to endure a life of soiled nappies and scummy baths, chaos and hunger, hopelessness and despair. These children need to be rescued, just as much as the victims of any other natural disaster.

By constructing children as needing to be rescued, families and parents are rendered as risky and harmful to children and the state is provided with an imperative to act and remove children, rather than address the social conditions that undermine parenting. As Chapter 4 shows, this discourse is evident in social workers’ accounts of their practice in relation to child neglect.

The current era is therefore dominated by a renewed orientation towards child protection. Within this approach, children are positioned as vulnerable and parents are understood as risky, as being responsible for this risk and as having the agency to change their circumstances (Morris *et al.*, 2017). Consequently, the impact of adversity of various forms on families’ ability to cope is under recognised. This overarching orientation towards child protection results in a state that is increasingly authoritarian and relies on statutory intervention with diminished early intervention and preventative services being given low priority. Thus, parents are responsibilised

but expected to fulfil their responsibilities with limited support and face an authoritarian response from the state if they do not. This approach of individualising social problems deletes the influence of social-structural factors on vulnerable families and renders parenting practices as fundamental: poor parenting is seen as the root of many social problems (Gupta, 2017) and parents are expected to remedy the situation with increasingly limited support. This renewed orientation towards child protection and increasing responsabilisation of parents forms dominant ideologies that circulate, and as this thesis will show, are perpetuated, and occasionally challenged, in situated interaction between professionals and between professionals and parents.

Key themes and debates about child protection systems and practices

Thus far I have sought to situate contemporary child protection systems and practices by tracing shifts, changes and tensions in the ways that child abuse and neglect are understood, in how systems of protection are organised and in the settlement between children, parents and the state within particular social, political and economic contexts. I now highlight the key themes that emerge from this review of the historical development of child protection practice which are pertinent to the exploration of the approaches to working with children, parents and families that are constructed and negotiated at an interactional level which forms the main body of this thesis. These themes are returned to in the analysis and discussion chapters.

Balancing family support and child protection has been a perpetual consideration and the appropriate balance between the two continues to be contested (Devaney & McGregor, 2017; McGregor & Devaney, 2019; Parton, 2014). Post-war social work with families was characterised by family support and preventative work. Whilst children were removed from their families, it was not until the development of the concept of child abuse in the 1960s and the child abuse inquiries of the 1970s and 1980s that child protection and the identification of risk became a significant focus of social work with children and families, sometimes displacing other considerations. However, by the 1980s it was considered that the focus had shifted too far towards child protection and that families were experiencing intrusive and sometimes damaging interventions. The Children Act 1989 was a significant attempt

to redress the balance as it contained mandates for protecting children and for supporting families, articulating a more preventative, integrated model. Yet research into the early implementation of the Act revealed that there was still too little focus on family support. Following the ‘refocusing’ initiative and the election of a New Labour government, a different balance between family support and child protection emerged. Identified as a child-focused orientation (Gilbert *et al.*, 2011), this approach focused on a broader range of concerns about children rather than just abuse and neglect with the aim of safeguarding the well-being of all children. Protecting children from harm was located within a wider range of factors that might impact on children’s development. To this end, a wide range of early intervention and preventative services were provided in addition to more authoritarian intervention if it was needed. However, the late 2000s marked a return to child protection within the context of the deaths of Victoria Climbié and Peter Connolly, the financial crisis of 2008 and the political ideology of the coalition government.

The Children Act 1989 remains a key piece of legislation today but has not been able to resolve the uneasy relationship between family support and child protection as significant concerns remain about authoritarian intervention and the lack of family support (Featherstone *et al.*, 2018; Featherstone *et al.*, 2014b; Parton & Williams, 2017). Families are expected to resolve their problems with limited support available and they are blamed and face consequences if they do not. Interventions are much more likely to be authoritarian given the child protection orientation, the proliferation of a ‘child rescue’ discourse and a focus on increasing the number of children that are adopted. It is mothers particularly that find themselves in these invidious situations. These critiques are reinforced by a plethora of research and other literature that draws attention to the significance of discrimination and disadvantage on the lives of parents, families and children. These social conditions are relevant in multiple ways, including impacting on health, child development, well-being and parenting and in rendering lives open to public scrutiny and state intervention (Brandon *et al.*, 2014; Bywaters *et al.*, 2018; Bywaters *et al.*, 2016b; Forrester & Harwin, 2010; Horwath, 2007; Stevenson, 2007). These adversities and inequalities are the key concerns of anti-oppressive practice. Critics have called for a prioritisation of relationship-based practice and family-minded approaches to redress

the balance between child protection and family support (Featherstone *et al.*, 2018; Featherstone *et al.*, 2014a; Featherstone *et al.*, 2014b).

The second key theme arising from the preceding review of the historical development of child protection practice is that there have been changes over time in what constitutes a risk to children. In the 1960s and 1970s child abuse was conceptualised as physical abuse to babies and young children which broadened to include the physical abuse of children of all ages (non-accidental injury). Within a fairly short period of time the definition of child abuse had widened to include emotional, sexual and physical abuse, and neglect (Dingwall, 1989). Following concerns about the enduring narrow focus on child protection, even after the implementation of the Children Act 1989, there was a need to ‘refocus’ the work to integrate and support child protection with policies and practices relating to family support. This was reflected in the change in the title of the version of *Working Together* published in 1999 to include ‘safeguarding’ rather than ‘protection’ and ‘abuse’ (Parton, 2011). This focus on safeguarding was also reflective of New Labour’s broader focus on children’s well-being and risks to their overall development encompassed in *Every Child Matters*. Since the election of the coalition and Conservative governments, there has been a renewed emphasis on child protection and less attention to the wider factors, particularly those relating to disadvantage and deprivation, that impact on children’s well-being.

Thirdly, and related to the previous theme, over time, the way that families’ problems are understood has also changed significantly. This is particularly important because the way that families’ difficulties (and risks to children, see above) are framed influences how families are responded to. In the post-war period there was recognition that poverty, crime and delinquency had an impact on families. Families were not blamed for these problems, instead professionals worked with families in supportive ways to try and help improve families’ circumstances. The ‘discovery’ of child abuse in the 1960s resulted in increasingly individualist explanations for concerns about children that identified parents as the problem. However, the impact of previous social and emotional deprivations on parents was recognised and parents were not blamed. Rather, the need for therapeutic work with the parents was the focus. The development of radical social work in the 1970s

meant that the impact of inequalities on families again became acknowledged but the child abuse inquiries of the 1970s and 1980s resulted in the family being increasingly understood as a potential source of risk to children. In the Children Act 1989 the responsibility of parents for care of their children is clearly stated. The definition of significant harm in the act states that the harm or likelihood of harm must be attributable to the care given to the child by the parent not being what a reasonable parent would be expected to give (s31).

New Labour's focus on the responsibilities of individual citizens meant that parents were increasingly responsibilised. The broadening out of concerns about child abuse and neglect to concerns about all children's well-being meant that parents' concomitant responsibilities were widened. However, there was awareness of the impact of wider social and structural factors on children's well-being. This was evident in the Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families which attempted to shift the focus of assessment away from an approach centred on risk and towards a more holistic approach that recognised the array of factors that might compromise parenting and children's well-being. Yet this understanding of the context of parenting has been marginalised and in the current era parents are conceptualised as risky, an understanding which is shored up by questionable neuroscience research and a focus on intervening early in children's lives. Parents are held responsible for their failings because the impact of poverty and other forms of disadvantage on the lives of parents, families and children are under acknowledged. Consequently, parents are blamed for situations which are often not of their making and are subject to authoritarian intervention. There is a clear link here to the current child protection orientation and the reduction in family support. As Chapter 4 shows, social worker accounts have shifted to an 'us' and 'them' approach to parents which pays little attention to the context in which parenting occurs and which is evident in the shifts discussed here.

By tracing the evolution of how families' problems are understood, we can see that individualising and pathologizing discourses have an enduring but shifting influence. Since the 1970s these discourses have co-existed alongside anti-oppressive research, theorising and practice that emphasises critical awareness of discrimination and social inequalities. The way that families' problems are understood in terms of who

or what is identified as responsible and the extent to which the context of parenting is recognised are related to particular ways of understanding the relationship between children, parents and the state. Consequently, this theme is particularly relevant to this thesis' overarching focus.

Lastly, alongside changes in the balance between child protection and family support, changes in which constitutes a risk to children and changes in the way that families' problems are understood, the education and role of the social worker have changed and have become increasingly regulated. Whilst the professionalisation of the role is a positive development, the increased need for accountability and monitoring has resulted in practice which is subject to standardised processes, targets and performance indicators, particularly due to the influence of New Public Management. However, there is evidence that this increased bureaucracy has had adverse effects on practice. For example, standardisation through ICT systems reduces complexity but also increases the possibility of error (Pithouse *et al.*, 2012; White *et al.*, 2010). Additionally, social workers have less time to spend with families because of the demands of bureaucracy and proceduralisation (Baginsky, 2013; BASW, 2013; Broadhurst *et al.*, 2010; Holt & Kelly, 2018; Munro, 2011a). The Munro Review of Child Protection (Munro, 2011a; Munro, 2011b; Munro, 2012) identified a focus on compliance and a reduction in professional discretion. Therefore, social workers have a difficult path to navigate. The work has become increasingly bureaucratised, there is a specific steer towards a focus on child protection, the resources available to help them do their job and to support families are reduced yet the social work value base characterised by human rights and social justice endures and social workers must find ways to adhere to their values in this challenging context.

These themes are all connected to shifts in the settlement between the state and the family and social work's role at the 'pinch point in the settlement' (Morris *et al.*, 2017, pg. 52). The state's role in terms of intervention has become increasingly authoritarian since 2010. Conversely, the focus on securing children's welfare through the state offering support to families has been marginalised. The economic, environmental and cultural barriers to ensuring children and young people are cared for safely are insufficiently recognised by the state. Instead, the state ascribes

families with the capacity needed to change their situations, despite the evidence of the social determinants that contribute to a likelihood of harm (e.g. Bywaters *et al.*, 2018; Bywaters *et al.*, 2016b). If they are assessed as not having the capacity, then the response is increasingly likely to be decisive intervention. Whilst the Children Act 1989 represented a significant re-specification of relationships between children, parents and the state, the current social, economic and political context has resulted in families who need help being understood and responded to in a highly problematic and stigmatising way.

Child neglect in the current era of child protection

The final section of this chapter considers how the key tensions inherent in the history of child welfare provision and in the current political context (explored above) and the orientation towards child protection are particularly problematic in relation to the issue of child neglect. Concerns about the direction of child protection are amplified when child neglect is considered. This is because issues of parental culpability are more challenging in the context of links between neglect, poverty and social deprivation. The problem of responsabilising parents is also highlighted when the gendered nature of parenting and of child neglect are considered. When parents are identified as culpable, this predominantly involves women and it is women who are overwhelmingly the focus of intervention intended to improve families' situations and the well-being of children (Edwards *et al.*, 2015; Farmer & Owen, 1995). Additionally, there are questions about whether the current child protection approach which is characterised by a focus on risk and is incident driven is the most effective way to respond to child neglect which tends to be defined in terms of patterns of behaviour that persist over time and impose harm on children in a cumulative way. Child neglect is a key focus of this thesis and this problematisation of the current orientation towards child protection in relation to neglect provides justification for this focus. It also identifies arguments in relation to forms of adversity, such as poverty, and gender which are returned to in the analysis and discussion chapters.

That neglect is harmful, sometimes fatally, to children is not disputed (Brandon *et al.*, 2013; Daniel *et al.*, 2011; Meadows *et al.*, 2011). However, the current emphasis

on responsabilising parents is particularly problematic when child neglect is concerned because the impact of poverty and other forms of discrimination and disadvantage on families (see e.g. Bywaters *et al.*, 2018) is insufficiently recognised. Thus, concerns about children are routinely decontextualized from the often difficult and impoverished circumstances in which they occur. For example, the definition of child neglect in Working Together (HM Government, 2018) specifies several omissions on the part of a parent or carer, such as the failure to provide adequate food, clothing and shelter, which can result in neglect of a child. Consequently, responsibility for child neglect is explicitly attributed to parents within this definition, irrespective of their circumstances and without reference to factors that are known to affect parenting. This contrasts with the World Health Organisation (WHO) and International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN) definition (2006) which distinguishes the availability of resources as a significant factor:

‘Neglect includes both isolated incidents, as well as a pattern of failure over time on the part of a parent or other family member to provide for the development and well-being of the child – *where the parent is in a position to do so* – in one or more of the following areas:

- health;
- education;
- emotional development;
- nutrition;
- shelter and safe living conditions.’ (pg. 10, emphasis added)

The absence of attention to structural factors that may contribute to neglectful circumstances is highlighted by the lack of policy overlap between maltreatment and poverty. In three poverty strategy documents, one covering the whole of the UK and the other two from the devolved governments of Scotland and Wales, child maltreatment is mentioned once in the UK-wide document and is absent from the others (HM Government, 2014; Scottish Government, 2014; Welsh Government, 2015). Whilst most children living in poverty are not neglected, there is compelling evidence that there is a link between poverty and child neglect, despite the lack of recognition of the link in family and social policy. This association has long been

recognised (Connell-Carrick, 2003; Spencer & Baldwin, 2005; Thoburn *et al.*, 2000) and is reinforced by more recent research evidence. Bywaters and colleagues have identified that poverty and maltreatment are strongly associated (Bywaters *et al.*, 2018; Bywaters *et al.*, 2016a; Bywaters *et al.*, 2016b). More specifically, as the level of economic hardship increases, so does the likelihood of child abuse and neglect. Another study of particular note is Hooper and colleagues' (2007) qualitative study of the experiences of families living in poverty in the UK. They found that child maltreatment had occurred in over 60% of households in their study.

The relationship between poverty and child neglect has been established, yet poverty does not simply cause neglect (McSherry, 2004). The relationship between the two is much more complex (Dubowitz *et al.*, 1993) so it is important to explore possible explanations for the connection. At the individual level, the bare fact of having minimal resources means that parents have to make difficult choices and consequently it may sometimes be impossible to meet children's needs (Minty & Pattinson, 1994; Save the Children, 2012). As already indicated, these resources are likely to be increasingly restricted as a result of recent cuts and reforms to benefits, the stagnation of wages for the low paid and the increasing cost of housing in some areas. Minty and Pattinson (1994) also suggest that poorer families are more likely to come to the attention of formal services (to ask for assistance) and thus are subject to increased scrutiny resulting in a greater likelihood of finding evidence of child neglect. The Hooper *et al.* study (2007) concluded that parental stress resulting from poverty (and other adversities) is a major factor in increasing the likelihood of maltreatment. Factors such as social support are important in mitigating the impact of this stress. It is argued that poverty can be viewed as a form of societal neglect (Hooper *et al.*, 2007; Stone, 1998). This is the failure to provide basic resources for families, like shelter, education and health care and the indirect effects of economic policies and societal attitudes and oppressions which can all impact on parenting (Spencer & Baldwin, 2005). Thus, there is a complex relationship between material poverty, structural inequality and the impact on parents of the adversities they have experienced.

Yet the focus on individual blame that is evident in the dominant policy and political discourse is at odds with the complex relationship between poverty and child neglect

(Gupta, 2017). One could argue that, from a social justice perspective, the attribution of responsibility to parents when poverty has such a significant influence could be perceived as discriminatory and unjust. This is particularly relevant for mothers as structural pressures disproportionately affect women (Daniel & Taylor, 2006), with lone parent families who are predominantly headed by women being significantly over-represented amongst those living in poverty (Stone *et al.*, 2019). Other groups that are particularly likely to be affected by poverty include families where at least one person is disabled (MacInnes *et al.*, 2014) and black and minority ethnic (BME) groups (Platt, 2009). Therefore, the responsabilisation of parents is particularly problematic when the impact of poverty and other forms of disadvantage and their connection with child neglect is not acknowledged. Moreover, in a context where family support is increasingly reduced as a result of austerity, families lack the necessary support to be able to make changes.

Current child protection policies and wider policies relating to the promotion of children's welfare pay insufficient attention to the gendered nature of child neglect. Whilst the neutral terminology of 'parents' and 'parenting' is ubiquitously used in policy documents (Daniel & Taylor, 2006; Edwards *et al.*, 2015; Gillies, 2014), overwhelmingly it is mothers who are identified as 'perpetrators' of child neglect (Daniel & Taylor, 2006; Swift, 1995) and the majority of child protection work is undertaken with women (Farmer & Owen, 1995). This construction of women as responsible for the care of children is evident in studies of practice. The dominant focus on dirt, disorder and the physical care of children in child protection work found in Scourfield's (2003) ethnographic research resulted in a scrutiny of mothering by social workers. In addition, mothers were also deemed responsible for protecting children from risky men (Scourfield, 2003; Swift, 1995) highlighting the dominant 'failure to protect' approach to domestic violence where mothers are held accountable for children's exposure to domestic violence and are expected to remove themselves and the children from the situation (Hester *et al.*, 2007). Parton and colleagues' (1997) research concluded that moral judgements about parenting primarily concerned mothers, who were assessed against particular expectations of maternal identity. Men on the other hand, were infrequently referred to, and if they were, it was often in negative terms (Scourfield, 2003; Swift, 1995). In a study of assessments in cases of child neglect Horwath (2005) found that, in comparison to

mothers, fathers/father figures often escaped scrutiny and any shortcomings on their part were rarely identified as the main concern. Similarly, Buckley (2003) identified that mothers were at the centre of child protection practice even when men were responsible for harm or potential harm to children. Yet this differential attention towards mothers and fathers is not recognised.

The current focus on early intervention has particular implications for mothers. Again, the neutral language of ‘parenting’ dominates, but early intervention policy draws heavily on child development theories, particularly (a renaissance of) attachment theory, which reinforce the importance of early experiences and the notion that caring work is the realm of mothers (Edwards *et al.*, 2015). As already indicated, the rise of neuroscience to support the foundational nature of early experiences, including during pregnancy, further reinforces the link between mothering and the care of children. As well as being implicated in the policy narrative, mothers are also the inevitable targets of early intervention, particularly now that it is increasingly delivered through pre- and post-natal care provision (Edwards *et al.*, 2015; Gillies, 2014), parenting programmes and interventions relating to social exclusion (Gillies, 2005). Consequently, it is mothers who are primarily identified as responsible for neglect and the care of children and who are the focus of early intervention and child protection work, yet this gender bias is not acknowledged.

It has also been noted that the incident-led system concerned with risk management that currently dominates child protection responses (Munro, 2012; Stevenson, 2007) does not respond effectively to child neglect. This type of maltreatment is generally characterised by an accumulation of concerns over time that does not usually prompt a response from the child protection system until that accumulation is significant enough or there is a substantial incident or ‘tipping point’ (Dickens, 2007; Doherty, 2017; Farmer & Lutman, 2012). Concerns that do not meet this threshold are less likely to get a response. Consequently, an incident-led system struggles to respond appropriately to child neglect as it often involves omissions of care meaning only certain types of risks to children are recognised (Tanner & Turney, 2003). This type of approach to child neglect fails to recognise the cumulative impact of a child’s circumstances and the potential of this to cause harm (Ayre, 1998; Tanner & Turney,

2003). As a result, it is evident that an authoritarian approach to intervention that is preoccupied with risk does not respond effectively to child neglect (Farmer & Lutman, 2012).

In summary, this section has demonstrated that, when considered in relation to child neglect, the key tensions inherent in the current political context and the orientation towards child protection are particularly problematic. Parents are responsabilised and whilst poverty and deprivation can impact significantly on families' abilities to care adequately for their children and are associated with neglect, this impact is under-recognised. Additionally, in relation to child neglect which is a gendered concept, it is predominantly mothers who are responsabilised and who are the recipients of interventions. Not only are parents, particularly mothers, unfairly identified as responsible, the way that neglect is responded to means that the impact of neglect on children is not fully recognised and addressed.

Constructing approaches to working with children, parents and families in interaction

Thus far I have explored the key tensions and debates inherent in the current political context and the orientation towards child protection and identified the changing social, political, economic and legal contexts for these developments. I have also explored how contemporary child protection systems and practices position children, parents and the state in terms of their rights, roles and responsibilities. The discussion so far has focussed on these issues at a broader social, political and legislative level. Relevant to this study's focus on the kinds of approaches to working with children, parents and families that are constructed at the interactional level, this section considers the small body of existing research that has explored the local construction of families' problems, explanations for these problems which can include the attribution of responsibility to parents and approaches to working with families. This is important because the ways in which families and their problems are constructed are connected to the ways in which the state responds in terms of the type of intervention required (Keddell, 2015; Nikander, 2003). Cases are shaped and ordered through accounts given by social workers and other professionals (Pithouse

& Atkinson, 1988) and these accounts are used to justify professional and institutional action (Hall *et al.*, 1997).

Studies of social work have shown that in case files and other written records and in interviews with social workers parents are frequently positioned as responsible (Hall *et al.*, 1997; White, 2003) and their versions of events are treated with scepticism (White, 2003). Hall and colleagues' study (1997) also identified that in interviews with social workers explanations were not given for parents' problems meaning that factors that impact on parenting were not acknowledged. However, there is also some evidence that in their written accounts social workers make attempts to mitigate parents' responsibility (White, 2003). Keddell's study (2015) of a large NGO provider of child protection services in New Zealand found that social workers used explanations such as mental ill health for parental problems in order to avoid emphasising parental culpability. However, these individualised explanations meant that important structural impacts on families' lives remained under-explored (Keddell, 2015). These studies emphasise the moral work involved in constructing accounts about cases and social work practice (Dingwall *et al.*, 1995; Parton *et al.*, 1997). Collectively these studies reinforce Hall and Slembrouck's (2011) findings that sometimes parental care is problematised and sometimes it is not with the underlying difficulties being more fully recognised. They found that attributing responsibility to parents was not a necessary condition for constructing the category of child protection; there were also situations in which deficits were constructed in other ways, such as resulting from social factors or cultural differences (Hall & Slembrouck, 2011).

A focus on family maintenance is an approach to working with families that also exists in social workers' accounts of practice. Whilst New Zealand has similarities to the UK in terms of its orientation towards child protection (Gilbert *et al.*, 2011), Keddell's New Zealand study (2013) found that in interviews with social workers there was a dominant family maintenance discourse consonant with Maori concepts of extended family that was used to frame decision making. Family maintenance focuses on preserving the biological family if at all possible, recognising the strengths of families and that children are best off living with their families whenever possible.

Dominant discourses can also be resisted. Broadhurst (2012) analysed social work talk from three studies of local authority children's services. She found that, in descriptions of their work, there were examples of professionals resisting the dominant discourse of child protection with 'small stories of family support' (Broadhurst, 2012, pg. 294). In this study, the supportive ethos of practitioner actions that were reported by participants was positioned in opposition to the normative institutional values that were risk averse and emphasised the self-sufficiency of parents. Keddell (2011) also argues that explanations for family problems that emphasised a lack of parental culpability which were put forward by social workers in descriptions of cases allowed resistance against the dominant construct of parents as risky and blameworthy. The heterogeneity of the findings from the above studies emphasises the multiple discourses and ideological possibilities for positioning children, parents and the state in situated accounts of practice.

Whilst these studies given an indication of the kinds of approaches to working with children, parents and families that can be constructed in social workers' accounts of practice, none of the studies had these kinds of relationships as their primary focus. Moreover, none of these studies specifically focused on child neglect. Considering how approaches to working with children, parents and families and the associated relationships between children, parents and the state are constructed in relation to child neglect is pertinent because issues of parental capability are more problematic in the context of links between neglect, poverty and social deprivation and when the gendered nature of neglect is considered (as discussed earlier). Exploring how social workers navigate these tensions is important. Consequently, this study addresses these gaps and shortcomings by having the construction of approaches to working with children, parents and families in interaction as its main focus and also by specifically focusing on child neglect.

Conclusion

Understanding the contemporary child welfare system requires an holistic understanding of its historical development and the way in which it is enacted in the present moment. This chapter has examined how child protection systems and

practices in England have developed from the post-war period to the present day in order to provide a context for understanding contemporary child protection systems and practices. It has also evaluated the changing social, political, economic and legal conditions for these developments. This examination of major developments in child protection policies and practices provides a context for understanding and interpreting the data obtained for this research. Key themes and debates about child protection systems and practices have been highlighted. A perpetual consideration has been achieving the appropriate balance between child protection and family support. This remains highly relevant today given the current orientation towards child protection and the retrenchment of family support services under austerity policies. These different perspectives on the role of the state reveal tensions between individual and structural explanations for families' difficulties. Parents have been increasingly responsibilised in the dominant policy and political discourse and the impact of poverty and other factors, especially in cases of child neglect, is frequently disregarded. Whilst a central concern with oppression can be seen in the history of progressive social work practice from the radical movements of the 1970s onwards, this does not always counteract the increased authoritarianism of the child protection system. These key themes and debates are central to this research and are returned to throughout this thesis in Chapters 4, 5 and 6.

Child neglect is the specific focus of this thesis and this chapter has identified how the concerns about the current direction of child protection, particularly in relation to the responsibilisation of parents, are amplified in the context of neglect. This is due to the gendered nature of neglect and because of the links between poverty and deprivation and neglect. Again, these issues will be returned to throughout this thesis.

This chapter has discussed the broader approaches to working with families at a policy and system level but it is also important to consider the kinds of approaches to working with children, parents and families are constructed at an interactional level. The limited research that contributes to understanding the situated construction of approaches to working with children, parents and families has been reviewed and the opportunities for furthering our understanding of this area were established. There is an absence of research that has as its primary focus the approaches to working with

children, parents and families that are constructed in and through interaction. This is the research gap that this thesis addresses. Additionally, as this chapter has illustrated, how approaches to working with children, parents and families and how associated relationships between children, parents and the state are constructed is particularly pertinent in relation to neglect. This is because issues of parental capability are more problematic in the context of links between neglect, poverty and social deprivation and when the gendered nature of neglect is considered. Therefore, this thesis examines the approaches to working with children, parents and families when there are concerns about neglect that are constructed in and through interaction.

Chapter 2: Conceptualising participation in child protection conferences

The previous chapter established the rationale for this study's focus on exploring the kinds of approaches to working with children, parents and families that are constructed in interaction, specifically in relation to child neglect. One of the ways in which this research addresses this aim is by considering how these kinds of approaches are constructed within a practice context: the child protection conference. It examines how the ways in which different participants in child protection conferences participate in the interaction are related to the broader approaches to working with parents and families described in the previous chapter. Consequently, this chapter specifically focuses on the existing knowledge about participation in child protection conferences and establishes the conceptualisation of participation that is employed in this research.

The participation of service users in social work processes has become increasingly embedded in legislative, policy and practice frameworks. Service user participation has its origins in concepts of social justice, empowerment, self-determination and the promotion of individual rights, as well as a consumerist approach that positions the service user as a customer (Jackson *et al.*, 2016). The concept of participation is emphasised as one of the values that is a core part of the social work profession (BASW, 2012), resonating with social work's concerns with recognising the impact of discrimination and oppression on service users (Thompson, 2016). Specifically in child protection, the emphasis on working in partnership with families arose in the wake of a series of child abuse inquiries in the 1970s and 1980s. It was a response to concerns about the impact of intervention on families and the need for a new settlement between the state and the family and is a core principle of the Children Act 1989 (see Chapter 1). However, the statutory and involuntary nature of much child protection work can present challenges for social workers as they have to balance their statutory responsibilities for protecting children with participatory practices which promote the rights of parents, aspects of practice which can conflict. Indeed, Healy (1998) suggests that there are limits to participation in child protection because of the specificities of child protection practice. The current context in which

a child protection approach is prioritised rather than an orientation towards family support (as outlined in Chapter 1) provides further challenges to fully embedding a participatory ethos (Holt & Kelly, 2016). The more recent concentration on disguised compliance⁴ (NSPCC, 2019; Reder *et al.*, 1993) is an additional challenge as it contributes to the belief that being sceptical about parents' actions and the motivations behind them is helpful in protecting children (Leigh *et al.*, 2019). Thinking about parents in this way is underpinned by risk-averse thinking rather than an approach that values, respects and trusts parents.

This research specifically focuses on participation in child protection conferences which are key inter-professional events in the child protection process that parents are also usually invited to (see Introduction). The involvement of parents in child protection conferences was one of the ways in which local authorities began to work in partnership with parents after the implementation of the Children Act 1989. Whilst child protection conferences were a core decision making forum before the implementation of the Children Act 1989, parents were not involved. However, the system does not distinguish between the presence of parents at these meetings and their active and consequential participation. This research specifically explores and contrasts presence with participation in these key meeting events.

In this study, in the analysis that follows in Chapter 5, the ideology of participation discussed above is considered from an interactional perspective in which participation is conceptualised as a situated accomplishment. Conversational analytic and (socio)linguistic research has contributed an understanding of participation that is grounded in the turn-taking system and the sequential nature of talk. The management of access to the conversational floor has been a particular focus, but also how participants use turns when they get them has been considered (Ford, 2010). More recently, interest has developed in the use of multimodal resources to participate (eg. Mondada, 2019).

⁴ Disguised compliance involves parents and carers appearing to co-operate with professionals in order to allay concerns and ultimately to diffuse profession intervention (Reder *et al.*, 1993).

This chapter explores the broader relevant literature on participation in child protection and then applies a closer focus to the interactional accomplishment of participation. In reviewing this literature, it establishes the grounds for the interactional perspective on participation that this thesis adopts. By drawing on and developing the existing literature on the interactional accomplishment of participation this chapter also establishes a conceptualisation of participation that informs this study and highlights the contribution that such an approach can make.

The analysis considers the ways in which both parents and professionals participate in child protection conferences. Therefore, this chapter discusses the relevant literature that identifies how professionals and parents are involved in child protection conferences and other child welfare meetings. It also discusses wider literature that demonstrates that the nature of interactants' participation in meetings is connected to how roles, status, power, expertise and responsibilities are enacted and negotiated interactionally.

In relation to both participation in child protection and the interactional accomplishment of participation, this chapter also sets out the opportunities for furthering our understanding of participation where this thesis seeks to make a contribution. The concept of participation has received little attention in asymmetrical events and accordingly the thesis makes a contribution to that aspect of the phenomenon. In examining participation in child protection conferences, this research contrasts it with presence, problematising the latter.

This chapter begins with an overview of the limited research evidence on parental participation in child protection, including research that focuses specifically on child protection conferences. In the second part of this chapter I explore the more general literature on participation in meetings which extends our understanding of how participation in meetings is accomplished. This section considers previous theorisation about participation and also research that is relevant to a conceptualisation of participation that focuses on how interactants secure or are given turns, how they can influence the content and direction of the interaction, how their turns are responded to interactionally and how the negotiation of role, status, expertise and responsibilities are related to the nature of interactants' participation in

meetings. The chapter concludes by identifying the ways in which this thesis aims to build upon existing research in order to extend our understanding of participation in child protection.

Parental participation in child protection

Research on parental participation in child protection has considered parents' experiences of the child protection system more generally and has also specifically examined their experiences of child protection conferences. Most of these studies are based on interview data analysed for the content of what is said. These studies provide a background for interactional studies that looked closer at the ways in which the apparent asymmetries are enacted in situated encounters, including the nature and extent of different parties' participation.

Parents' experiences of the child protection system

There is a body of research that has explored parents' experiences of the child protection system, particularly attending to the participatory dimensions of this. Generally, the research demonstrates that parents do not have positive experiences of the child protection system and its processes. Through interviewing parents about their experiences, studies have found that parents felt unsupported throughout the child protection process (Muench *et al.*, 2017), they experienced the system as inflexible and uncaring (Smithson & Gibson, 2017), their experiences of involvement in child protection processes were stressful (Ghaffar *et al.*, 2011) and whilst they were included in the child protection process, they felt that this was not on an equal basis compared to professionals (Smithson & Gibson, 2017). A study of the perspectives of families who were living in poverty and had experienced child protection intervention found that social work services focused on policing rather than support (Gupta & Blumhardt, 2016). Families felt they were viewed as a risk rather than a resource and they felt misunderstood and judged by professionals who did not refer to the adverse situations in which families were living (Gupta & Blumhardt, 2016). Buckley and colleagues' study (2011) revealed that parents experienced the development and implementation of child protection plans as compliance orientated and sometimes coercive. The asymmetry between parents and professionals in these events is apparent in these findings.

Research has also considered how social workers contribute to parents' experiences of the child protection system and the extent to which they experience process as participatory. Some parents describe poor relationships with social workers (Muench *et al.*, 2017; Smithson & Gibson, 2017), but also there were examples of good relationships (Smithson & Gibson, 2017) and these good relationships were likely to facilitate parents' participation (Buckley *et al.*, 2011; Ghaffar *et al.*, 2011; Jackson *et al.*, 2016; Toros *et al.*, 2018). Overall, these studies suggest that parents do not experience child protection processes as particularly participatory and their experiences are predominantly negative, albeit there seems to be a role for good relationships with social workers in facilitating participation. Moreover, the asymmetry between parents and professionals in these events is evident in these findings. The experiences of parents described in these studies underpin Munro's recommendations about the need for greater relational social work practice (Munro, 2011a).

Parents' experiences of child protection conferences

Specifically in relation to child protection conferences, several studies have considered parents' experiences of participating in these meetings. Whilst professionals are reported to view parents' participation in child protection conferences positively (Corby *et al.*, 1996), when interviewed parents reported predominantly negative experiences of child protection conferences (Birmingham City Council, 2014; Buckley *et al.*, 2011; Corby *et al.*, 1996; Ghaffar *et al.*, 2011; Muench *et al.*, 2017; Smithson & Gibson, 2017), experiencing them as distressing, intimidating or embarrassing. Often parents did not feel that they had been adequately prepared for the conference or had had sufficient time to read the report (Birmingham City Council, 2014; Smithson & Gibson, 2017). Parents describe difficulties in contributing their views in the conferences (Jackson *et al.*, 2016; Thoburn *et al.*, 1995). When they were able to give their views, they felt they were not heard (Birmingham City Council, 2014; Smithson & Gibson, 2017; Thoburn *et al.*, 1995) or their views were not taken into account (Birmingham City Council, 2014; Corby *et al.*, 1996; Thoburn *et al.*, 1995). Parents also report that they felt that they could not challenge information from professionals (Corby *et al.*, 1996; Jackson *et al.*, 2020; Jackson *et al.*, 2016), perhaps because they felt intimidated or wanted to

appear compliant. The way that parents are given opportunities to contribute also appears relevant. When parents were given the opportunity to respond to each professional in turn, experiences were more positive whereas if they had to wait for all professionals had contributed, parents found it more difficult to respond (Jackson *et al.*, 2020). It is apparent, then, from the findings of these studies that there are often considerable asymmetries between parents and professionals in these events.

The difficulties that parents report in contributing in consequential ways to child protection conferences are indicative of the authoritarian practices (Featherstone *et al.*, 2014b; Parton, 2014) that appear to dominate many child protection conferences (Jackson *et al.*, 2016). Indeed, how parents experience participation in all aspects of the child protection system seems to be significantly influenced by the prioritisation of a child protection approach and authority-based ways of engaging with families in this arena (Toros *et al.*, 2018). The experiences of parents indicated above are also aligned with the bureaucratic discourse of public organisations (Sarangi & Slembrouck, 1996) in which non-professional experience is marginalised and resisted. Overall, the findings of these studies suggest that, despite an emphasis over an extended period of time on the participation of service users, there has not been a significant shift in improving parents' experiences: parents report predominantly negative experiences of child protection conferences and that their views are often marginalised.

Interaction in child protection conferences and other child welfare meetings

The above studies that have focused on parents' experiences of participating in child protection conferences have done so largely through interviewing parents which yields post hoc accounts. Whilst they provide important findings in relation to parents' experiences of participating in child protection conferences, they do not illuminate how parents' experiences might be shaped by the interaction in these meetings and how participation in these meetings can be understood interactionally. They also do not provide details about what actually happens in practice, given that the gap between beliefs and actions is recognised (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984). Relevant to this research are a small number of studies that have looked at the interaction in child protection conferences and other child welfare meetings. These studies shed light on the nature of the participation of different parties in these

meetings from an interactional perspective. The findings from these studies demonstrate that in meetings between families and professionals, interaction and participation tends to be asymmetrically organised with professional contributions dominating. These studies also reveal how different participants position themselves and are positioned by others. These findings are particularly relevant to this study as I focus on the nature and extent of the participation of different parties and also the consequences of this participation for the positioning of participants.

Considering first the nature of parents' participation in these meetings, studies show that the participation of parents is constrained (Broadhurst *et al.*, 2012; Hall & Slembrouck, 2001; Koprowska, 2016), with parents undertaking a restricted range of contributions compared with professionals (Hall & Slembrouck, 2001). For example, in child protection conferences, parents predominantly respond to information provided by professionals (Hall & Slembrouck, 2001) rather than being able to initiate the contribution of information. Parents' responses are often characterised by efforts to defend against perceived accusations of failings (Koprowska, 2016). When parents given their views, their perspectives tend not to be accepted by others indicated by minimal responses, cutting short parents' turns and restatement of original concerns (Broadhurst *et al.*, 2012; Koprowska, 2016). These findings illustrate how non-professional perspectives can be contended and discounted within the discourse of bureaucratic systems (Sarangi & Slembrouck, 1996).

However, there is some evidence that more recent solution-focused approaches to practice, which tend to give greater attention to parents' strengths, may be more facilitative of parents' participation in meetings. For example, Appleton and colleagues (2015) compared traditional child protection conferences with a sample that employed a Strengthening Families approach. They found that in the Strengthening Families conferences parents were more likely to contribute first and were empowered to take the lead. Family Group Conferences (FGCs) are another way of involving families more fully in decision making. A FGC is a process in which families can meet together to find solutions to problems that they and their children are facing, within a professionally supportive framework. There is some evidence that integrating FGCs into the child protection process improves families' experiences. For example, Leeds significantly expanded its Family Group

Conferences services and offered families the possibility of a FGC instead of an initial child protection conferences, although an initial conference was still held if the FGC was unsuccessful (Mason *et al.*, 2017). Families who participated in FGCs reported overwhelmingly that their experiences were positive (Mason *et al.*, 2017).

Yet even if families' participation in meetings is more significant and much less constrained, this may not result in involvement in decision making which is a specific focus of some child welfare meetings such as child protection conferences. Hitzler and Messmer (2010), in a study of German care planning conferences for young people, found that when service users were present, they were afforded plenty of space to give their views and to provide their own accounts of their circumstances and were able to influence the decision making process when the issue under discussion was one of less importance. However, when there was a significant decision to be made, they found that professionals, through building coalitions or 'staging' a decision, ensured that the service user did not influence the decision outcome that the professionals thought should be made and consequently service users lacked power (Hitzler & Messmer, 2010). A study of the communication between Dutch family supervisors and parents whose child was placed under supervision by the juvenile court (Hofstede *et al.*, 2001) found that the involvement of families in joint decision making with professionals was a gradually increasing process over the duration of the supervision order. These studies show that service user involvement in decision making only occurs in certain circumstances.

The studies that have been discussed thus far have illustrated the prevalence of asymmetric interaction between professionals and families in child welfare settings. However, this asymmetry is interactionally negotiated rather than imposed, something which is demonstrated by its local accomplishment. Both professionals and parents can orientate to facilitating or restricting participation and can influence the participation of others (Hofstede *et al.*, 2001). Whilst it may appear that professional entitlements to shape interaction dominate because parental interactional participation is constrained, parents can deploy discursive strategies to resist, overtly and passively, the expectations and constraints regarding their contributions (Broadhurst *et al.*, 2012). For example, in a study of pre-proceedings

meetings⁵ the findings demonstrated that parents passively resisted advice or direction by providing unmarked and minimal responses or they overtly resisted the institutional goals by producing disaligned responses or challenging institutional or epistemic authority (Broadhurst *et al.*, 2012). This highlights the role of all parties in shaping the interaction; parents do not simply take up imposed roles in the interaction.

There is also research that reveals the nature of professionals' participation in meetings between parents and professionals in child welfare settings. These studies are relevant to the participation of professionals in child protection conferences in this study. Broadhurst and colleagues' (2012) study of pre-proceedings meetings identified that interactional moves such as initiating topics, asking questions, inviting responses, formulating concerns and displaying epistemic authority were overwhelmingly the domain of professionals. There is also research that illustrates the influence professionals have within the decision making process. The findings of Hitzler and Messmer's (2010) study of German care planning conferences for young people highlighted that professionals controlled the decision making process. There also appears to be a connection between the identities ascribed to parents, which are predominantly controlled by professionals, and the decisions made in meetings. For example, Hall and colleagues' (2006) research which analyses the talk in a child protection conference describes how the character of the mother (the only parent present) is strategically depicted and negotiated, often collectively as different professionals add their contributions, to produce a characterisation that is inextricably linked to the possible outcome of the meeting. These descriptions by professionals are afforded greater decisional weight than those attempted by parents which can be significantly different to those of professionals and are frequently resisted (Hall *et al.*, 1999). One of the ways in which the dominance of professional views is accomplished is through the use of type-token formulation (Hall *et al.*, 1999). With professionals, specific instances (token) are indicative of an underlying

⁵ Meetings involving the Local Authority and the parents that are held because there are significant enough concerns that the Local Authority have considered going to court to obtain a Care Order. The purpose of the meeting is to discuss the concerns and devise a plan to safeguard the child so that court can be avoided.

pattern (type) whereas parents' descriptions are treated singularly and not representative of a wider pattern (Hall *et al.*, 1999).

Whilst professionals are able to employ discursive resources to gain access to and manage the floor and to dominate decision making, they also carefully manage topics and issues that might be difficult. For example, in a study of initial child protection conferences (Koprowska, 2016), social workers showed sensitivity to parents through the use of delicacy to diminish the accusatory tenet of the concerns described and also supplied narratives of redemption in descriptions of parents' actions and behaviours. Delicacy can be marked by mitigations, perturbed or delayed delivery, expressive caution or indirectness (van Nijnatten & Suoninen, 2014). In this way, the social workers' turns were recipient-designed (Sacks *et al.*, 1974) as they were tailored to meet the perceived needs of the parents. Contributions of professionals can also be designed to pursue particular goals. In meetings between family supervisors and parents whose child is under the supervision of the court, social workers downplayed their authority in order to gain the co-operation of the parents (van Nijnatten, 2005; van Nijnatten *et al.*, 2001).

As well as constructing and attending to parents' identities in meetings, professionals also carry out identity work in relation to themselves. From an interactional perspective, the professional and client identities that are negotiated are mutually dependent and co-constructed (Hall *et al.*, 1999; Juhila & Abrams, 2011). As Hall and colleagues put it: 'it is through the construction of the client's identity that social work is shaped' (1999, pg. 295). In her research into German care planning conferences, Hitzler (2011) argued that when professionals categorise a young girl as a client who needs taking care of, they also construct themselves as working in her best interests with an almost paternalistic role. In this way, client categorisation legitimates the professional role and institutional action (Hall *et al.*, 2006).

This small body of research goes some way to contributing to understanding interaction in child protection conferences and the nature and extent of different parties' participation in these meetings. However, there are areas where our knowledge is limited and this thesis seeks to further our understanding of interaction and participation in child protection conferences by addressing these gaps. There are

only two studies that specifically analyse the interaction in child protection conferences (Hall & Slembrouck, 2001; Koprowska, 2016). Both of these studies have participation as their specific focus and illustrate the asymmetrical organisation of interaction. However, Koprowska's study (2016) only involved initial child protection conferences and only analysed the openings of these meetings. The study by Hall and Slembrouck (2001) analysed a single child protection conference held in the mid-1990s when the involvement of parents in child protection conferences was in its infancy. Therefore, whilst other studies shed some light on interaction and participation in meetings between professionals and families, there is an absence of research that includes recent child protection conferences (both initial and review) and analyses participation throughout the whole of the meeting. This thesis attempts to fill this gap.

The findings from the above studies illustrate the asymmetrical organisation of interaction and participation with professional contributions dominating. My study adds to these findings by further analysing the strategies and devices through which parents' contributions are marginalised. There is little attention in the above studies to how parents might enact authority and influence the interaction (Broadhurst and colleagues' study (2012) is an exception). Consequently, in this thesis I consider how parents enact authority when participating in child protection conferences and the mechanisms through which this is accomplished and facilitated. The connection between participation and involvement in decision making has been noted by Hitzler and Messmer (2010) in their study of German care planning conferences in relation to residential care. However, this aspect of participation has not been explored in relation to child protection conferences in England, a setting which differs quite significantly from meetings held to plan and assess the options for children living away from their parents. Therefore, this thesis explores the relationship between participation and involvement in decision making specifically in the context of child protection conferences. Finally, and specifically related to the main aim of this thesis, none of the studies noted above have explored how the nature and extent of the participation of different parties in child protection conferences is connected to broader approaches to working with parents and families which encompass understandings of relationships between the state and the family. This study seeks to

address this gap and Chapter 5 provides the reader with a systematic analysis of the interaction in child protection conference involving concerns about neglect.

Participation in meetings

The research reviewed above provides findings that suggest how interaction in child protection conferences takes place and the nature and extent of different parties' participation in these meetings. Yet this research evidence is not extensive. A greater understanding of how participation in meetings is accomplished can be gained from reviewing sociolinguistic and conversation analytic literature on participation, particularly that which focuses on interaction in meetings. These studies offer a more in-depth picture of the nature of participation in meetings and how it is enacted interactionally and they inform the way that participation is understood and researched in this study. This thesis also examines the connection between participation and involvement in decision making, given that child protection conferences have a clear decision making function. The following section discusses the approach to understanding decision making in child protection conferences taken in this study. I devote the remainder of this chapter to discussing the conceptualisation of participation used in this study.

Child protection conferences as decision making meetings

Child protection conferences are meetings with specific and bounded functions. The main purpose of these meetings is to come to a conclusion about whether a child has suffered, or is likely to suffer, significant harm, make a decision about whether the child should be the subject of a child protection plan and, if so, formulate a plan that safeguards and promotes their welfare (HM Government, 2018). Therefore, child protection conferences have a clear decision making purpose.

Whilst the cognitive domain of problem solving and decision making has generally received the most attention, there is a growing body of research that views these activities as interactional processes (Barnes, 2007; Boden, 1994; Clifton, 2009; Halvorsen, 2010; Huisman, 2001). From an interactional perspective, a decision can be defined as the 'construction of a commitment to future action' (Huisman, 2001 pg. 70). The child protection plan in a child protection conference is an example of

such a commitment to action. Research that examines how decisions are accomplished interactionally in meetings understands them as negotiated and emergent (Huisman, 2001; Kwon *et al.*, 2009; Raclaw & Ford, 2015) and largely invisible (Boden, 1994; Huisman, 2001). It can be difficult to identify the exact moment when a decision is made as they are incremental and fragmented (Atkinson, 1999; Boden, 1994) and decisions may only be specified as such after the event (Boden, 1994; Huisman, 2001). However, this is not the case in child protection conferences. Because of the nature of child protection conferences and their predefined structure, decisions in these meetings are explicitly articulated at a particular juncture in the meeting. It is of upmost importance that the decision outcome is made clear in child protection conferences because this is institutionally mandated by statutory guidance (HM Government, 2018) and because children's safety and well-being are at stake.

This research specifically examines the connection between participation and involvement in decision making. However, the explicit articulation of the decision outcome that occurs in child protection conferences is not the focus. What *is* the focus in terms of involvement in decision making are the decision making processes, located within interactional sequences, that precede the explicit statement of a decision. These are the incremental steps that form the basis of the emerging decision (Boden, 1994; Huisman, 2001), although it should be emphasised that these steps are predominantly non-linear (Angouri & Bargiela-Chiappini, 2011; Stubbe *et al.*, 2003). Activities such as outlining the state of affairs or formulating the problem are commonly observed as part of the decision making process as is some sort of assessment of the information presented, either implicitly or explicitly (Halvorsen, 2010; Huisman, 2001). Assessing information and defining the problem or state of affairs are often bound up together as they are not neutral and objective but are connected to possible outcomes and to potential categorisations and the attribution of responsibility (Halvorsen, 2010; Huisman, 2001). This is connected to the construction of harm or likelihood of harm and who is responsibilised in a child protection conference which are in turn connected to the decision outcome. Consequently, in considering the connection between participation and involvement in decision making, this research is interested in the extent to which different participants are involved in the antecedents of the decision outcome. These involve

the formulation and assessment of the concerns about neglect and the (explicit or implicit) attribution of responsibility, both of which are frequently accomplished through the presentation of versions of events, actions and people within the child protection conference.

Conceptualising participation

Turning now to participation, the way that participation is conceptualised in this thesis builds on and develops earlier work that theorises the nature of interactants' participation in the ongoing interaction. Goffman's (1981) classic participation framework (later expanded by Levinson (1988)) goes beyond the global categories of speaker and listener and specifies a range of available production and reception roles. These roles are organised according to who is producing the talk, whether the talk is narrating the speech or position of another party, whether the hearer is ratified or unratified, and who is addressed by the talk. This was an attempt to represent the different possible participation statuses in relation to an utterance at a given point in interaction through which participants display their understanding of what is happening and how they align to events, also known as footing (Goffman, 1981). Participants can change their participation status by shifting their footing (Goffman, 1981). However, Goodwin and Goodwin (2004) identify some shortcomings of Goffman's framework. They suggest that Goffman's categories of speakers and hearers are too static and do not focus on how the participation of different actors is dynamically organised (Goodwin & Goodwin, 2004). Moreover, the framework does not account for how, in the process of building an utterance, speakers and hearers take each other into consideration (Goodwin & Goodwin, 2004). There is also an absence of attention to multimodal resources that are significant for participation in talk (Goodwin & Goodwin, 2004; Mondada, 2019).

Goodwin and Goodwin (2004) built on Goffman's (1981) framework, developing their own theorisation of participation which stresses the dynamic and embodied nature of participation. They emphasise the reflexive and constantly changing relationship between the speaker and the hearer that shapes and is shaped by the structure of the talk and propose a focus on: 'how both speakers and hearers as fully embodied actors and the detailed organisation of the talk in progress are integrated into a common course of action' (Goodwin & Goodwin, 2004, pg. 226).

Goodwin and Goodwin's (2004) foregrounding of the dynamic nature of participation usefully informs the conceptualisation of participation used in this study as I understand the ways in which interactants participate as constantly (re)accomplished and (re)negotiated in the evolving interactional context. However, they focus particularly on participation in terms of the relationship between the speaker and the hearer and the structure of talk. In this thesis I focus more broadly on how participation is accomplished within the unfolding interaction. Consequently, I extend existing theorisation of participation, bringing together four aspects of participants' involvement in interaction, specifically examining the meeting genre. I focus on how participants can secure or are given turns and what they can do with their turns in terms of influencing the direction and content of the interaction. I combine this with a focus on the uptake of contributions in terms of how they are responded to and taken forward in the subsequent interaction, something that is not considered in depth in relation to participation and is a gap that this thesis addresses. In this study, this conceptualisation of participation is contrasted with, and used to problematise, presence in meetings. Goodwin and Goodwin (2004) and Goffman (1981) do not explicitly consider how the possibilities for participation might be different for different interlocutors. Therefore, I also consider how the negotiation of role, status, expertise, responsibilities and power are related to the nature of interactants' participation in meetings. These are the interactional features that are the focus of the analysis and the following sections will consider research related to these aspects of interactants' participation in meetings.

Turn-taking in meetings

Being able to take a turn within ongoing interaction is an important aspect of participation. Importantly, the way that turns are organised shapes possibilities for action and participation (Angouri & Mondada, 2018). Conversation analytic research has specified a system of turn-taking in which speakers produce turn-constructual units (TCUs) which are the components of turns and changes of speaker are possible at transition-relevant places (TRPs) which occur at the completion of TCUs (Sacks *et al.*, 1974). The allocation of turns happens through either the identification of the next speaker by the current speaker or the next speaker self-selects (Sacks *et al.*,

1974). The turn-taking system in informal conversation is unconstrained and takes varied forms (Sacks *et al.*, 1974).

Turn-taking in institutional settings, such as meetings, differs from this as it tends to be more constrained and restricted (Drew & Heritage, 1992b). What particularly distinguishes meetings in terms of turn-taking is the role of the chair in managing and allocating turns, known as a mediated turn-taking system (Angouri & Mondada, 2018). The chair then has the ability, through their interactional role, to facilitate or restrict access to the floor. However, the particularities of the role of the chair are negotiated within each meeting (Boden, 1994). In formal meetings, turns will typically be allocated by the chair and participants must signal to the chair their wish to contribute (Svennevig, 2012b). Moreover, when allocating turns, chairs can specify particular types of actions for those turns such as the provision of information or an answer to a question (Ford, 2008). In meetings that are less formal, there is likely to be more speaker self-selection and next turn allocation by the current speaker, with turn-taking sharing similarities with everyday conversation (Svennevig, 2012b). There is also less intervention from the chair in these meetings who may only intervene to allocate turns when there are difficulties such as unresolved competition for the floor (Pomerantz & Denvir, 2007). Therefore, the way that turns are allocated and organised depends on the formality of the meeting (Boden, 1994) and the degree of formality depends on the contingencies of the occasion and the participants involved (Holmes *et al.*, 2007; Pomerantz & Denvir, 2007). Not only does this mediated turn-taking system in meetings proceed through verbalised contributions, embodied resources including gaze, gesture and body orientation are also used to sequence talk (Ford, 2008; Mondada, 2019), although this thesis does not draw on video data (see Chapter 3 and Chapter 6). My analysis of participation in child protection conferences draws on these findings and considers the extent to which different parties have control over the allocation of turns. Child protection conferences are more formal meetings and therefore it is likely that the chair has greater involvement in allocating turns. This connects with the nature of bureaucratic institutions in which professionals rather than lay people have greater access to institutional practices (Sarangi & Slembrouck, 1996).

The taking of turns at talk does not necessarily proceed in a sequential and ordered way and interruption, a form of overlap, is a way that interactants can attempt to secure the floor. Overlap is common in talk and is usually relatively short (Sacks *et al.*, 1974). It predominantly occurs close to the end of turns, at the beginning of turns, at possible TRPs or in the form of continuers (Sidnell, 2010). The majority of occurrences of overlap are not considered interactionally problematic (as an interruption might be) because they ‘promote the progress of the action embodied in the talk’ (Sidnell, 2010, pg. 135). Overlaps are more likely to be recognisable as interruptions if they disalign or compete with the trajectory of the action that is occurring (Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris, 1996; Sidnell, 2010) or if there is marked competition for the turn (Jefferson, 2004). Interruption is a complex area and there has been scant research on interruptions in meetings (Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris, 1996). Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris’ (1996) study that focused on interruptions in British and Italian management meetings classified overlap into facilitative or interruptive overlap. These categorisations depended on the point at which the interruptions occurred during the other participant’s turn and whether it was supportive or competitive, maintained or shifted the topic or was semantically similar or different. They found that facilitative speech was more common. When interruption did occur, interrupters were successful in completing their turns but were not successful in solely securing the floor as the interrupted participants were also likely to continue their turns (Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris, 1996). These strategies that participants use to control the allocation of turns will be a specific focus of my analysis.

Influencing the content and direction of interaction

In addition to being given or securing turns in the ongoing interaction, another aspect of participation in meetings is the strategies that participants use to shape the content and direction of the interaction and the extent to which these strategies are available to different participants. One way of shaping the content and direction of the meeting interaction is through topic management. Meetings are characterised by the introduction, progression and conclusion of topics and issues proposed for discussion which can be specified in the form of an agenda (Svennevig, 2012b). The agenda can be used as a device for topical progression in meetings through introducing items on the agenda and managing transitions between items (Svennevig, 2012a). The agenda

can also be used to return a discussion that has digressed to the agenda topic (Holmes & Stubbe, 2015). The chair often plays a central role in setting the agenda and topical progression (Asmuß & Svennevig, 2009; Holmes & Stubbe, 2015), but the extent of this role will be determined locally, with the degree of formality and the leadership style of the chair as contributory factors (Holmes *et al.*, 2007). Child protection conferences have a pre-set agenda that guides the meeting and, given the formality of the meeting, the chair is likely to have a significant role in the progression of the agenda.

There are two key discursive practices that can be used to influence the content and direction of the interaction and which can also function to manage the organisation of topics: questions and formulations. Holmes and Chiles (2010) have identified how questions can also be used, often by chairs, in the management of meetings. For example, questions can play a role in agenda management and they can develop and progress topics by seeking information and requesting confirmation. Questions can also be used to seek or request agreement from the group, a practice that is often associated with summing up what has been agreed or summarising the discussion or agenda topic by the chair (Asmuß & Svennevig, 2009; Holmes & Chiles, 2010).

Questions have also been the focus of research in institutional and formal contexts which has identified the responses to questions are typically controlled in terms of form and content (Holmes & Chiles, 2010). For example, in some institutional settings such as courtrooms and news interviews, the turn types of questions and answers are allocated to particular interactants (Atkinson & Drew, 1979; Clayman, 1992) and respondents have limited possibilities for influencing the content and direction of the interaction (Drew & Heritage, 1992b). The form of questions can also be significant in controlling responses. For example, yes/no or either/or interrogatives place constraints around the possible answer (Holmes & Chiles, 2010). Questions can also produce particular expectations about the kind of information that should be included in the answer (Ehrlich & Freed, 2010), although a response that does not conform is possible but more challenging. Paired utterances, produced by different speakers, such as questions and answers, are called adjacency pairs (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). The production of the first pair part makes the production of the second pair part relevant (Schegloff, 1972). However, disalignment

with the interactional agenda by not producing the relevant second pair part is possible and can be defined as resistance (Hepburn & Potter, 2011; Stivers, 2008). Additionally, responses to other speaker's turns can take the form of preferred or dispreferred responses. Preferred responses, such as the acceptance of an invitation, are produced without interactional 'trouble' (Pomerantz, 1984). Conversely, dispreferred responses, such as declining an invitation, are always marked, often involving additional interactional work, and are formulated differently to preferred responses (Pomerantz, 1984). Whilst the use of questions results in control over the form of the response, the respondent can also attempt to control the content and direction of the interaction by disaligning or producing a dispreferred response, although this involves breaching normative expectations. This is considered further in the analysis when parents' attempts to control the interaction are examined.

Child protection conferences have a specific decision making function (detailed above) and questions play a role in meeting talk that informs decision making. Halvorsen's (2015) analysis of how questions are employed in an operational planning meeting in the oil and gas industry revealed that they had an important function in the decision making process. Questions enabled participants to emphasise information that they considered relevant and to address specific issues. They occurred at key points in the interaction such as at the problem formulation stage, when different options were being assessed and when alternative options were being proposed.

Formulations, which involve a summary of an understanding of the previous discussion (Raclaw & Ford, 2015), can also function to influence the content and direction of the interaction. They afford the participant who produces them considerable control over what is recognised as having been previously discussed, or agreed or noted as important and what is not affirmed (Holmes & Stubbe, 2015). They can be used to facilitate agreement and consequently are connected to topic closure (Asmuß & Svennevig, 2009). In a study of medical school curriculum development meetings, Barnes (2007) considered how agreement is facilitated interactionally. A key way that a shared understanding was established and preserved was through the use of formulations, again used predominantly by the chair. Specifically, candidate pre-closing formulations were used to indicate the potential

closure of a topic by marking the completion of a task or the agreement that had been reached. These formulations offered other meeting participants the opportunity to make further comments but the most common response was silence, the preferred response, thus indicating agreement with the participant (usually the chair) making the formulation (Barnes, 2007).

Formulations also play a significant role in fixing meaning and influencing decision making. Clifton (2009) studied the talk that took place in the management team meetings of a language school in order to examine the discursive strategies used to influence decision making in interaction. One way of 'doing influence' was through the use of formulations, often preceded by 'so'. Clifton demonstrates that 'formulations can be a powerful discursive resource for doing influence because they can be used to delete the voice of others and they are also implicative of topic closure' (Clifton, 2009 pg. 68), emphasising the multiple functions of formulations. Research into management meetings in Dutch organisations by Huisman (2001) demonstrates that formulations are not neutral representations and involve elements of assessment which convey the producer's stance. They can also emphasise elements of the previous interaction that support the decision or solution that is subsequently proposed (Huisman, 2001). Again, like questions, formulations are frequently used by meeting chairs (Barnes, 2007; Clifton, 2009) and consequently are an important resource for chairs to influence the content and direction of the interaction.

These studies demonstrate how topic management, questions and formulations are significant resources for influencing the content and direction of the interaction and also how questions and formulations particularly are relevant to the process of decision making. They also identify that access to these resources is not equally distributed amongst meeting participants: they are most often used by chairs. These findings are drawn upon in the analysis to examine the extent of interactants' participation in child protection conferences in terms of how they are able to shape and influence the content and direction of interaction. The analysis also explores the extent to which different participants have access to these interactional strategies.

Responses to participants' turns

Also key to the conceptualisation of participation used in this study is whether and how participants' turns are responded to. Interaction is not just accomplished by the performance of speaker roles; rather, there is a need for active reciprocity on the part of at least one recipient (Mondada, 2007). Displaying reciprocity can most obviously involve verbal responses, including those which are very short such as minimal response tokens (Gardner, 2001). Additionally, a range of multimodal resources can be used to enact a recipient role (Ford & Stickle, 2012). Whether participants' turns in child protection conferences (particularly those of parents) are responded to at all and the nature of the responses is explored in the analysis.

Responses to participants' turns can also embody markers of whether that contribution is accepted and agreed with or whether there is an issue with the prior action. I consider whether a participant's contribution is validated and taken forward within the ensuing interaction to be an important facet of participation. This is explored in the subsequent analysis in terms of considering how the versions of events, actions or people produced by both parents and professionals in child protection conferences are responded to. Responses to turns can accept the prior contribution through displaying affiliation through agreement or taking the same stance as the co-interactant (Steensig & Drew, 2008). It is also possible for participants' turns to be responded to in ways that signal that there is opposition to the prior action which is evident in disaffiliative moves such as disagreeing, challenging, reproaching, complaining or criticising (Steensig & Drew, 2008).

The interactional negotiation of disagreement, frequently in the context of meetings, has been the focus of sociolinguistic research which has identified that disagreement or opposing views is common but is not an inherently negative or positive act (Angouri, 2012). Instead, the way in which opposing views are enacted is situated, depends on the norms of the communicative group (Angouri, 2012) and can be significantly influenced by the institutional context (Dall & Caswell, 2017). As the focus of my study is how participants' turns are responded to in child protection conferences, particularly those turns that present versions of events, actions and people, what is relevant here is research that sheds light on the role of disagreement in this. For example, research has identified ways in which disagreement is displayed

interactionally. Interactants can draw on a variety of linguistic and embodied strategies when disagreeing. For example, a study of workplace meeting discourse found that disagreements can involve interruptions, increases in the speaker's volume and pace, and markers such as 'no' and 'not' (Schnurr & Chan, 2011). Other indicators of disagreement include 'but' and 'well' (Pomerantz, 1984; Schiffrin, 1987). Embodied markers of disagreement identified by Mondada (2013) in participatory democracy debates include lateral head shaking and slapping the table. Other strategies for doing disagreement more evidently attend to the maintenance of public self-image, or 'face' and the 'face' needs of others (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Interactants can use strategies to avoid or reduce face threats when disagreeing (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1967). For example, in Schnurr and Chan's (2011) study of workplace meeting discourse, interactants frequently used mitigation strategies such as laughter, silence and attempts to postpone the discussion. Similarly, Ford's (2008) study of women's contributions in workplace meetings found that when disaffiliative actions such as raising issues that had been previously overlooked or identifying problems were being performed, interactants' turns displayed caution in the form of delays in delivery, prefacing, mitigation and accounting for the disaffiliative action. These characteristics demonstrate a preference for agreement and orientation towards the norm in these specific contexts (Ford, 2008; Pomerantz, 1984). The analysis of how professionals' and parents' turns are responded to draws on these research findings regarding possible strategies for doing agreement and disagreement in order to examine contributions that are and are not interactionally accepted.

Enacting role, status, expertise, responsibilities and power

Meetings frequently provide opportunities for the enactment of role, status, expertise, responsibilities and power. As Munby suggests, meetings 'function as one of the most important and visible sites of organisational power, and of the reification of organisational hierarchy' (Mumby, 1988, pg. 68). The nature and extent of interactants' participation in meetings is connected to how roles, status, expertise, responsibilities and power are enacted and negotiated interactionally. The enactment of the chair role is particularly associated with authority and power because the chair has a special role within meetings whereby they are afforded the institutional authority to moderate the talk (Angouri & Mondada, 2018; Asmuß & Svennevig,

2009). In child protection conferences the chair has an interactional role but also their role is defined in the statutory guidance (HM Government, 2018). Angouri and Marra (2010) identified the activities that typically index the chairing role. These include the opening and closing of the meeting, agenda and task management, turn allocation and sanctioning inappropriate conduct (Angouri & Marra, 2010, pg. 623). As discussed above, the chair is usually involved in managing the floor which includes the allocation of turns and has influential interactional resources such as questions and formulations available to them to accomplish these activities and which are often comparatively less available to other meeting participants. The analysis in Chapter 5 considers how the interactional resources used by the chair contribute to facilitating their own participation and enable or restrict the participation of others.

In addition to the chairing role, there are other aspects of interactants' roles, status, expertise and responsibilities that are relevant to how interactants participate in meetings. Holmes and Stubbe (2015) identified that interactants with more status and authority had the most influence on the structure and style of the meeting, its content and the trajectory of the discussion. In child protection conferences professional attendees are there because of their professional expertise, which may potentially be made relevant within the evolving interaction. One way that interactants can enact authority and expertise is through displays of epistemic stance (Heritage, 2013). Epistemic stance is the expression of epistemic status interactionally (Heritage, 2013). Epistemic status is distinct from epistemic stance because it concerns participants' 'comparative access, knowledgeability, and rights relative to some domain of knowledge' (Heritage, 2013, pg. 376) irrespective of what participants display publicly. The analysis considers how interactants, particularly professionals, make their expertise relevant by enacting epistemic authority (the establishment of a more significant or authoritative view (Heritage & Raymond, 2005)) through their epistemic stance and how this relates to the accomplishment of participation.

It is evident, then, that power relationships are relevant to meeting interaction. Whilst power is complex concept (Angouri & Bargiela-Chiappini, 2011), it is increasingly understood as something that is dynamic and is constructed and enacted in interaction (Holmes & Stubbe, 2015; Lazzaro-Salazar *et al.*, 2015) rather than as

deriving from existing hierarchies or relationships. Particularly relevant to child protection conferences is research that considers how authority is enacted in encounters between professionals and lay people. For example, Mehan's (1983) study of special education committee meetings illustrates how the accounts of 'expert' professionals such as psychologists prevailed over the accounts of class teachers and parents who were considered lay people. The way that professional reports were presented imbued them with authority and meant that they were accepted without debate in contrast to the lay reports which were repeatedly questioned. Mehan's demonstrates how language enacts the role relationships which provide the authority for the claims and recommendations made. Also relevant is research that examined meetings between school representatives and the child's parents held to discuss whether the child should be assessed for ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) (Hjörne, 2005). The school representatives enacted a collective institutional voice through displaying authority and expertise so that the institutional perspective, rather than the opposing parental view, dominated. These studies demonstrate that there is a relationship between enacted authority in meetings in relation to status, role, expertise and responsibilities that can result in some participants having a greater influence over aspects of the meeting interaction or activities. This appears particularly evident in meetings between professionals and lay people. This aligns with the bureaucratic discourse of public institutions in which professionals rather than lay people have greater access to institutional practices (Sarangi & Slembrouck, 1996). The enactment of authority by professionals and how it is used to accomplish participation in contrast to how parents' attempts to enact authority are responded to is explored in the analysis.

Conclusion

The overarching aim of this thesis is to explore the approaches to working with children, parents and families when there are concerns about neglect that are constructed in and through interaction, attending to the relationships between children, parents and the state that are constructed interactionally. One of the ways in which this is done is to consider how the nature and extent of different parties' participation in child protection conferences is connected to broader approaches to working with parents and families. This chapter, then, has reviewed existing research about participation, exploring the concept of participation from a social work and

child protection perspective and also from an interactional perspective to establish a conceptualisation of participation that informs this study. In reviewing the literature on participation from these two perspectives, this chapter has also identified the opportunities for creating new knowledge in relation to how participation is understood, which where this thesis seeks to make a contribution.

Taking the concept of parental participation as something that is embedded in social work legislation, policy and practice, the first part of this chapter reviewed the research on parental participation in child protection. This study builds on the scant existing research on interaction in child protection conferences to further our understanding of interaction and participation in these meetings. It does this through contrasting presence with participation in this asymmetrical event. More specifically, this study seeks to further our understanding of the asymmetrical organisation of interaction in child protection conferences by exploring in more detail the strategies and devices through which some contributions are prioritised and some are marginalised. Related to this, in existing studies there has been little consideration to date of how parents might influence the interaction and enact authority. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by considering how parents enact authority when participating in child protection conferences and the mechanisms through which this is accomplished and facilitated. Child protection conferences have a specific decision making function and, following Hitzler and Messmer (2010), this study also explores the relationship between participation and involvement in decision making processes in these meetings, something which has not been considered before. Finally, and specifically related to the main aim of this thesis, existing studies have not explored how the nature and extent of the participation of different parties in child protection conferences is connected to broader approaches to working with parents and families which encompass understandings of relationships between the state and the family. This study seeks to address this gap.

In reviewing the more general literature on participation in meetings, this chapter has also established the conceptualisation of participation that informs this study and the related interactional features that will be the focus of the analysis of the child protection conferences. I build on and extend existing theorisation of participation, focusing more broadly on how participation is accomplished in the unfolding

interaction within meetings rather than on the relationship between the speaker and hearer in order to contrast presence with participation. Specifically, I have established the importance to the conceptualisation of participation of how participants secure turns within the dynamic, sequentially organised interaction, the way that participants can influence the content and direction of the interaction and how turns are responded to by other participants. This chapter has also highlighted the close connection between participation and the enactment and negotiation of roles, status, expertise and responsibilities and this research seeks to further understand how power relationships are enacted within a setting in which families' lives are being scrutinised and parents can be held accountable.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The previous chapters have reviewed the historical development of contemporary child protection systems, policies and practices and associated key tensions and debates and also the literature that is relevant to an interactional analysis of participation in meetings between professionals and families. This review has provided the rationale for the aims and research questions that this thesis addresses.

To reiterate, the overarching aim of this thesis is to explore social work approaches to working with children, parents and families when there are concerns about neglect. In particular, it focuses on the ways in which relationships between children, parents and the state are constructed interactionally. It seeks to relate these constructions at the interactional level to the understandings that exist at the broader organisational, political and societal level. This research has two complementary strands which contribute to addressing the main aim of the research. These strands involve social workers' talk about their practices and a practice context where social workers interact with parents and other professionals: the child protection conference.

The detailed research questions are as follows:

- 1. What approaches to understanding and working with children, parents and families are constructed at an interactional level in social workers' accounts of their work involving child neglect?*
- 2. How are relationships between children, parents and the state, in the context of the complexity of neglect, constructed in social worker's accounts of their practice?*
- 3. In relation to the approaches and relationships that are constructed, how do social workers navigate any tensions and differences?*
- 4. Within the specific site of child protection conferences that involve concerns about neglect, what is the nature and extent of parents' and professionals' participation in the interaction?*
- 5. What are the implications of ways of participating in child protection conferences for how the roles and responsibilities of parents and professionals are understood?*

6. How are approaches to working with children, parents and families that are constructed at the interactional level of social work practice connected to the broader organisational, political and societal context?

In this chapter I outline the methodological considerations which informed the research strategy used to investigate the approaches to working with children, parents and families that are constructed in and through interaction, specifically in relation to neglect. I begin by outlining and critically evaluating the social constructionist perspective from which this research was conducted and how this informed the choice of research design and methods. Then I describe the research design and data collection procedures that were used in this research including the limitations of the study. Next, I discuss the ethical aspects of the research and reflect on my position in the research. Finally, I describe how the data was analysed using an interactional sociolinguistics approach and consider issues of quality in qualitative research.

Theoretical approach

The ontological and epistemological underpinnings of this research are social constructionist, consistent with the study's focus on the approaches to working with children, parents and families that are constructed in specific contexts and the role of talk and interaction in this.

Social constructionism is a theoretical position which takes a critical stance towards positivism. There have been a number of influences on its development, but Berger and Luckmann (1966) introduced social constructionism to the social sciences (Burr, 2015) with later significant contributions by Gergen (e.g. 1985) who emphasised the influence of language on the construction of knowledge (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2010). Social constructionism is not a single theoretical perspective, rather it underpins a number of different research approaches across a variety of disciplines (Burr, 2015; Gubrium & Holstein, 2008). Whilst this range of approaches is varied and there is no agreed single definition of social constructionism, there are a number of tenets which feature to a greater or lesser extent in social constructionist approaches (Burr, 2015). Firstly, for social constructionists there is no single reality

out there that can be objectively discovered; it is not possible to reveal the ‘truth’. Social constructionism is anti-realist (Burr, 2015) and the alternative proposed is that we construct versions of the world, or what we take to be reality, through social processes (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Witkin, 2012). We cannot stand outside the situation we are trying to understand and assess it from a detached position. Knowledge about the world is not a fixed entity, rather it is made and remade through people’s interactions with each other in their everyday lives (Burr, 2015). Once knowledge is seen as flexible and fluid, it becomes possible to construct different, and sometimes competing, versions of the world. Consequently, the interest is in how different versions are constructed and how ‘truth’ claims are made: how the veracity of one version is put forward whilst undermining other versions (Potter, 1996).

Given that this thesis examines how approaches to working with children, parents and families are constructed interactionally including how families’ problems were understood and the roles of parents and social workers, professionals and the state, social constructionism provides for a consideration of how meanings and versions of events, actions and people are produced and legitimated. A social constructionist approach facilitates the recognition of the negotiated and constructed nature of the kind of issues I was focusing on such as the contested nature of child neglect and how parental responsibilities in relation to child neglect are understood (see Introduction and Chapter 1). A social constructionist approach also questions taken for granted knowledge. It leads us to consider why the world is understood in particular ways and how categorisations such as gender, which are not predetermined, shape how we understand the world (Burr, 2015; Witkin, 2012). Part of this study involves a focus on dominant, often gendered, understandings about parenting and families’ problems, revealing the interactional construction of these understandings.

Central to many contemporary social constructionist informed approaches is the role of language. It is not considered a neutral vehicle for transmitting information about the world (Witkin, 2012). Instead, language plays a central role in representing and constructing the world, social identities and social relations (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). When the constructive nature of language is emphasised, it foregrounds the

possibility that things could have been said in a different way or understood differently over time. Specifically relevant to this study's focus on the construction of approaches to working with children, parents and families in different interactional contexts, is social constructionism's emphasis on the role of language and social interaction in meaning-making. The construction of versions of the world is not something that is undertaken through individual action. Rather, people make sense of the world in a social environment and, therefore, knowledge is sustained through social processes (Burr, 2015; Cromby & Nightingale, 1999). Shared versions of knowledge are constructed through social interaction and practices whilst alternative ways of understanding are excluded. Social constructionist approaches also maintain that knowledge is historically, culturally, and socially contingent (Burr, 2015); it is subject to change and produced by prevailing social conditions. Whilst the constructive nature of language and discourse is generally agreed upon, there are different views about what discourse is, and therefore how it is studied. The idea of discourse as a body of knowledge or way of thinking about a particular phenomenon which is historically located originates in post-structuralism and particularly the work of Foucault on the production of knowledge by institutions (Burr, 2015). In contrast, other constructionist approaches focus on a more micro level on how words are used in talk and text, on the performative ability of language and consider the work that language does and the effects that it achieves (Edwards, 1997).

Yet, social constructionist approaches are not without criticism. Some critics such as critical realists suggest that social constructionism rejects the notion of an objective reality that we are able to access, such as the material world (Edley, 2001). However, it is argued that many social constructionists, for example Potter, Edwards and Gergen, do not actually state this in their work (Edley, 2001; Gergen, 2001). Moreover, this criticism misses the point of social constructionism. Questions about whether there is or is not an objective reality are not the concern of social constructionism. It is not concerned with ontology, rather its focus is epistemologically on how we can know about the world (Taylor & White, 2000) and denying the existence of reality would be a realist position (Potter, 2003). It is also suggested that, theoretically, there is no way of deciding which version has merit above another and all truth claims have equal status and value (Burr, 2015). This

leads to an ‘abyss of relativism’ whereby it is possible to claim anything (Taylor & White, 2000). Yet many constructionists refute this criticism. Potter (1996) argues that it is equally realist to claim that there is no possibility for preferencing one version as it is to claim that there are universal standards of truth. Another criticism of social constructionism is that it focuses specifically on language and discourse as ways of representing the world and fails to consider that there are other ways to understand the world such as through embodiment: we also experience the world through our bodies (Cromby & Nightingale, 1999).

Whilst social constructionism does have some limitations, it has many strengths and remains a valid theoretical position. One of its strengths is its critical approach, as social constructionist analyses often result in the questioning of taken-for-granted knowledge (O'Reilly & Lester, 2017). If knowledge is not assumed, this means it is possible look at how things that are considered to be inherent and objective are actually socially constructed and arise out of social interactions. This critical aspect of social constructionism was another reason why this approach was compatible with this study. This research problematises the dominant ways in which parents’ responsibilities (particularly mothers’ responsibilities) and the state’s role in responding to concerns about children are represented.

Situating this research within a social constructionist paradigm resulted in a focus on qualitative methods and an approach to understanding these methods as co-constructed interactional events involving accounts and versions that are specifically constructed for that event rather than as objective representations of reality. The analytic approach used, interactional sociolinguistics (described later), also aligns with a social constructionist view of discourse because of its attention to situated meaning. In addition, interactional sociolinguistics attempts to bridge social constructionist approaches that focus on micro-level discourse and those that attend to macro-level processes by attending to macro-societal issues within microanalyses (Gordon, 2011).

Research design and methods

The design of this study was influenced by the epistemological underpinnings of the research but also by pragmatic decisions about data collection that were made during the course of the research (Angouri, 2018). This section therefore will narrate how the research design evolved due to decisions made at key points in time, describing how the research developed from the study that I had initially envisioned into the study that I was actually able to undertake due to pragmatic considerations.

The genesis of this research began many years before I commenced my PhD. It began when I worked on a research study about kinship care and was first exposed to research and practice about child protection, children in care, the courts and children and families social work. This research study and a number of others that followed it (with different foci) meant that, prior to commencing this PhD, I was an experienced researcher in the child welfare field. I was well versed in the available research literature, legislation, policies and procedures governing the work and the ideologies and positions embedded in the social work that was undertaken with children and families. I had spent lengthy periods of time sitting in children's services offices reading files for various research projects with the activity of children and families social work happening around me. I had also met and talked with (often in interviews) many social work professionals, managers, children, parents, foster carers and kinship carers. Therefore, my immersion in the broad area of the research was significant and prolonged and I had had the opportunity to be close to the contexts of practice.

My previous research experience, and particularly my experiences of being in social work offices, led me to become interested in how the business of social work, particularly children and families social work, got done (Hall *et al.*, 2014). I was also particularly interested in child neglect having carried out a previous research project specifically about neglect and become interested in its constructed and contested nature (Farmer & Lutman, 2012). In the first instance, the broad focus of this research was how child protection concerns were talked about, with a specific focus on neglect. I was interested in how these things were accomplished in interaction. The aim was to study the creation of meaning as well as the situated production of

versions of the world. In order to do this, I wanted to study sites where concerns about neglect (and other forms of abuse) were discussed and child protection work took place. I initially chose to focus on child protection conferences because they are key inter-professional sites where child protection work gets done and where there is a specific focus on definitions and thresholds (i.e. whether there is risk of significant harm and the category of harm). Arguably, the research could have taken as its focus other occasions where child protection concerns are discussed such as strategy meetings or core group meetings. However, child protection conferences were chosen because they ‘can be a crucial, pivotal point in the overall child protection process, facilitating analysis of information, appraisal of risks, decision making and planning for intervention’ (Sidebotham *et al.*, 2016 pg. 176) that may result in a child being removed from a family.

However, whilst the collection of data from child protection conferences was the initial aim of the research, during the fieldwork phase the acute challenges of gaining access to these meetings became apparent (challenges which were anticipated but were not expected to be so extensive). Consequently, pragmatic decisions were made to broaden the scope of the study to include other types of data in addition to child protection conferences. The use of a small number of focus groups in this study was initially intended as a means to orient myself to the local area and local working practices around neglect and provide a context for understanding the audio recordings of child protection conferences. Whilst they did indeed fulfil this function, as the study progressed and it became necessary to broaden the focus of the research, guided by other previous research (Hall, 1997; Hall *et al.*, 1997; Hall & Slembrouck, 2011; Hall *et al.*, 2006) it became apparent that they were a rich source of data in which social workers constructed concerns about neglect (and other forms of abuse) and families’ problems and positioned parents and the state in terms of their responsibilities. I also decided to undertake interviews with social workers which provided opportunities for them to talk about concerns about children and specifically understandings and concerns about neglect and the parents and families that they work with, in the context of their own practice. Consequently, these were both sites where social workers constructed ways of working with children, parents and families and navigated any tensions between these approaches. Therefore, this study evolved during the course of the research and became a study of the

approaches to working with children, parents and families when there are concerns about neglect that are constructed in and through interaction, attending to the relationships between children, parents and the state that are constructed interactionally.

Methods of data collection

This study employed three methods of data collection: audio-recordings of child protection conferences, interviews with social workers and managers and focus groups with social workers and managers.

Audio-recordings of child protection conferences

Audio-recordings of the interaction in child protection conferences were an important method of data collection. Child protection conferences have an explicit purpose set out in the procedures (HM Government, 2018) (see also Introduction) but when they are viewed as co-constructed interactional events, they are complex situations which require considerable interactive work to make them recognisable as child protection conferences. For example, roles are enacted, documents and procedures are constructed as relevant, categorisation work is undertaken, agreement and disagreement are interactionally negotiated, versions of concerns are constructed, as are versions of self and others (Hall *et al.*, 1999; Hall & Slembrouck, 2001; Hall *et al.*, 2006). The presence of professionals and also the parents adds an additional layer of complexity to the interactional event. Child protection conferences are also sites where the organisation itself is constructed (Boden, 1994; Heritage & Clayman, 2010). It was this interactional negotiation, between multiple parties, of understandings of the concerns about neglect and the interactional enactment of roles, responsibilities status and expertise and how these relate to participation that meant that seeking audio recordings of these meetings was key to this study.

Interviews with social workers and managers

The interviews focused on social workers' experiences of child protection conferences with a particular focus on neglect. They were intended as opportunities to examine how social workers talked about the problems that the families they work

with have and how they talked about their own practice. In these descriptions of practice and cases social workers described concerns about children, families' problems and undertook positioning of themselves and others. This provided the possibility of exploring the construction of approaches to working with children, parents and families in and through interaction and also how any tensions between these approaches were navigated.

In line with a social constructionist epistemology, the interviews carried out for this study were understood as actively constructed accounts rather than as a way of directly accessing experience (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997; Silverman, 2017). As Rapley (2001) puts it, interviews are not viewed as a 'resource' in which what is said by the interviewee directly reflects reality. A more traditional view of interviews sees the interaction as a transparent and neutral way of accessing the inner beliefs and experiences of participants (Roulston, 2010). Instead, in this study, the interview data is seen as reflecting a constructed reality and thus the interview is conceptualised as a 'topic' (Rapley, 2001). Whilst interviewees might discuss experiences and events, these narratives are specifically constructed through the interview occasion in that they are versions that are told for a specific event (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). However, this is not a one-way process. Both the interviewee and interviewer contribute to the co-construction of meaning (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Rapley, 2001). The interviewer plays a role in contributing categories, identities and ways of understanding to the event. Thus, the fundamentally social nature of the interview is recognised.

This approach to understanding the interview event has consequences for how the accounts and versions produced within the interview are understood. Talk in general is replete with accounting practices (Antaki, 1994) and it anticipates and refutes potential criticism (Garfinkel, 1967). Interviewees produce discursive accounts and versions for the purposes of the interview (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The immediate audience is the interviewer with the outputs of the research also having a wider audience. Therefore, interviewees demonstrate competence and authority in their talk (Antaki, 1994; Potter, 1996). In this particular study, we can understand the interviewees as producing accounts that identify them as competent members of the social work profession. The accounts or versions must also be authoritative or

convincing. With the increasing regulation and management of social work practice, the need for social workers to produce acceptable and defensible accounts of practice is common (Parton, 1998) and is inevitable in many situations such as reports to others, child protection conferences and legal proceedings (Hall *et al.*, 1997). Not only are accounts and versions constructed in interviews but interviews are also sites for role performance and the construction and contestation of perceptions about roles (Angouri, 2018). At the same time as being constructed at a local level, accounts, versions and role responsibilities also point to the wider context of social practices, norms, ideologies and shared knowledge that provide ways of understanding local constructions (De Fina, 2011; Wetherell, 1998).

The interviews were therefore conducted with this perspective in mind. An interview guide was used (see Appendix 1) which was designed to provide interviewees with opportunities to give extended accounts about cases they had worked on. The objective being to obtain extended sections of talk in which interviewees constructed the problems that the family had, particularly in relation to concerns about neglect, positioned those that were involved and also constructed the social work response to these problems. I also used the interviews as opportunities to obtain contextual information about the local authority and the child protection process including child protection conferences. This occurred particularly in the interviews with senior managers as these interviewees were less focused on individual cases and focused instead on describing processes and procedures to me. This type of information aided, for example, my understanding of what was happening in the child protection conferences. In conducting the interviews, I drew on my existing interviewing skills developed in previous research projects. For example, I focused on establishing rapport and an open and welcoming stance (Mann, 2016). I ensured I engaged in active listening and created spaces for narratives (Mann, 2016). At times, I also reflected back to participants what they had said to demonstrate or clarify understanding (Mann, 2016). Follow-up and probe question were used to explore comments and topics in more depth (Mann, 2016). Although this did not happen, I was alert to signs that an interviewee might be feeling uncomfortable or distressed and might want to take a break or end the interview.

Focus groups with social workers and managers

A topic guide was used for the focus groups (see Appendix 2) that centred around their understandings of neglect, interventions in relation to neglect and their experiences of working with children and families where neglect was a concern. However, I found that the participants tended to take hold of and steer the topics themselves so that little input was needed from me. This was a particular strength of the focus groups as it allowed the participants' concerns and issues to emerge organically rather than discussion being predominantly prompted by me (Edley & Litosseliti, 2010).

The focus groups were understood in the same way as the interviews: as site of knowledge construction rather than knowledge collection (Edley & Litosseliti, 2010). They were viewed as actively constructed events in which accounts, versions and identities are accomplished. The co-constructed nature of meaning is particularly significant in focus groups as there are multiple contributors to constructed knowledge (Wilkinson, 1998). So not only is meaning constructed in the interaction between the researcher and the participants, but interaction between participants also constructs meaning. This was particularly evident in my data when participants asked each other questions or when two participants talked about a case that they had both worked on. The dynamics of the interaction within the group, such as disagreement or 'groupthink' (Janis, 1982 cited in Kelly & Milner, 1996), was seen as an advantage rather than a problem because it reveals how positions and meanings are negotiated and renegotiated, how disagreement is managed and how shared understandings are developed (Edley & Litosseliti, 2010). However, it is possible for focus groups to become unduly dominated by strong personalities who limit the contributions of others (Smithson, 2000) and it is down to the skill of the moderator to manage this. I did not experience this in my focus groups but I felt that the interaction in one of the focus groups could have been affected by the presence of a member of the senior management in the local authority. It is likely the social workers in this focus group tailored their responses to ensure they were acceptable to the senior manager although the senior manager did initiate and engage with critique about the local authority's current practices.

The study sites and gaining access

The first step in the data collection process once ethical approval had been granted was to find local authorities that were interested in being involved in the research. A shortlist of eight potential local authorities was drawn up that met the following criteria: the local authority was large enough that it held at least 300 child protection conferences per year (thus maximising the potential number of conferences that the study could draw from), was a reasonable travelling distance from my home address (personal circumstances did not permit lengthy travel and overnight stays) and had not been judged to be inadequate by Ofsted⁶ in the last year as these authorities would be undergoing significant changes and would potentially be less likely to have the capacity to be involved in research. The intention was to work with two local authorities so that if difficulties were experienced with one authority the study would still be able to progress in the other authority.

Local authorities were approached in stages with initial preference being given to those who had established links with the University of Warwick. The first local authority was approached via the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB). These boards, which are coterminous with local authority boundaries, coordinate the work of local organisations so that they work together effectively to safeguard children and promote their welfare and are mandated to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of training in the local area. They have relationships with all professional groups, services and agencies such as health services, the police, schools and voluntary sector services that are likely to be present at a child protection conference. The LSCB showed interest in the research and an initial meeting with the Business Manager and Training Manager was held which went well. Research Governance procedures were discussed and it was agreed that I would make an application to the local authority's Research Governance Panel which met monthly. I submitted the paperwork but the day before the meeting it became apparent that a senior manager within the local authority had become aware of my research and consequently my application to the Panel was withdrawn.

⁶ Ofsted (The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) inspects and evaluates local authority providers of children's social work services.

Unfortunately, after considerable delays the LSCB and local authority withdrew all support for the research and I was unable to progress with this local authority.

On the basis of my experience of approaching the first local authority, I changed my approach and wrote directly to Directors of Children's Services (often copying in Principal Social Workers for Children and Families). Using this method, I approached a further seven local authorities in two stages. Three declined to be involved and three showed substantial interest. The seventh showed some tentative interest which did not progress any further.

Although I had initially intended to work with two local authorities, I held initial discussion meetings with the first three local authorities that had responded positively in case access was denied in any authority further down the line. These meetings covered the practicalities of undertaking the research, information about the organisation of children's services within the local authority and communicating the research to others within the local authority. Of the three local authorities that I held initial meetings with, one was initially interested and I went through the process of obtaining Research Governance approval. However, the next arranged meeting was cancelled at short notice and I had great difficulties in getting any further response from them despite contacting the link person and the Principal Social Worker several times. I later discovered that the authority had undergone an Ofsted inspection during the time that I was in contact with them and was rated 'inadequate'. There remained two local authorities that were interested in the research and I was able to progress the research and collect data in both of these authorities. These two authorities were neighbours but geographically and socio-demographically different. One is a city with an ethnically diverse population and large pockets of deprivation. The other is predominantly geographically rural with a lower level of ethnic diversity. This authority has some areas of deprivation but also areas of significant affluence.

Approvals

The research was granted approval from the University's Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

(https://warwick.ac.uk/services/ris/research_integrity/researchethicscommittees/hssre)

c). In one local authority approval was also required from their Research Governance Panel under the Social Care Research Governance Framework. This was obtained without any difficulty. The second local authority deemed that Research Governance approval was not required after they received copies of the University's ethics committee approval and the Research Governance approval obtained from the other local authority.

One local authority felt that approval should also be obtained from the LSCB which was unproblematic. However, during this process the NHS partner agencies identified that the research would need to be registered locally with them. I was expecting this to be a simple process, but at one point it was suggested that full Health Research Authority approval would be needed which would have caused significant delays to the research. After discussing further with the individual NHS Trusts it was deemed unnecessary to obtain HRA approval because the research was not taking place on NHS sites, it did not involve NHS staff undertaking additional tasks, it did not involve patient data and each member of staff had to give their own consent to be involved in the study.

Communicating information about the research taking place

Once all of the required permissions were in place, information about the project was circulated by the local authority so that potential participants would be aware of the research in advance. This took place in different ways depending on the local authority. For example, information about the research was included in an internal blog in one local authority and in an email to team managers in another. Authorities also informed partner agencies that would be likely to attend child protection conferences about the research via LSCBs.

I also met with operational managers in each local authority who were responsible for either duty and assessment teams, longer term teams or both of these services within a specific locality. In these meetings I briefed the managers about the research and asked them to disseminate information to their teams. I also attended team meetings when managers felt it was best for me to communicate my research directly to the team.

Delays

After delays due to the problems with the first local authority that was approached, there continued to be delays in gaining access to local authorities. When approaching local authorities directly it often took weeks and sometimes months for them to reply to initial approach letters despite polite follow-up enquiries. Once a positive response was received it was often several more months until an initial meeting could be arranged as it could be difficult to find space in senior managers' diaries. These difficulties highlight some of the challenges of accessing research sites through gatekeepers (Reeves, 2010).

In both participating authorities, delays were experienced because of Ofsted inspections which took place during the course of the research. These inspections resulted in important meetings and data collection opportunities being cancelled. In one authority I was asked to put the research on hold during the four weeks of the inspection and it took time to resume the research from the point at which it had stopped as people had to be reminded about the research and research procedures needed to be reconfirmed.

In general, gaining access was a long and challenging process. Despite some very genuine interest in my research, translating this interest into data collection opportunities was hugely difficult. Individuals within the authorities were often slow to reply to contact and there were some I never managed to be able to meet despite their pivotal role in disseminating information about the research to their teams. The nature of child protection social work in the current context means that it is a time pressured job with demanding caseloads which is highly likely to have contributed to the slow responses/lack of response. There is also the possibility of the impact of fears of criticism given public outcry about child deaths and the vilification of social workers in the media (Warner, 2013).

Dataset and the process of collecting data

The qualitative research methods outlined above enabled me to collect three types of data across the two local authorities. I observed and audio recorded three child protection conferences (one initial and two review conferences). Three focus groups were held involving a total of 12 participants and I interviewed seven social workers

and managers. Table 1 provides details of the data collected in each of the local authorities.

Table 1: Data collected in each of the local authorities

Data Type	LA1	LA2	Total
Child protection conference	2	1	3
Focus groups	1	2	3
Interviews	7	0	7

I will now describe how the different types of data were collected.

Audio-recording of child protection conferences

I was interested in cases where there is some discussion about child neglect, therefore the focus was to identify conferences which were being held because there were concerns about neglect.

The two local authorities took different approaches to identifying conferences and obtaining permission for me to attend the conference. In the first authority, I had discussions with different senior managers about how best to identify potential conferences. It became apparent that the child protection conference service felt that neighbourhood teams would be best placed to identify conferences (because of the late notice teams tended to give the conference service about the need to convene a conference) and the neighbourhood teams felt that the child protection conference service would have a much wider overview of the conferences that were being held. An impasse had been reached and I decided the best approach that I would have some influence over would be to ask the social workers that I interviewed if they were working with any families that might be interested in taking part in the research. This was a successful strategy with the majority of social workers that I interviewed in the authority being able to identify families that might be willing to take part in the research. Two conferences were obtained this way. I also asked the social workers and managers involved in the focus group in this authority if they were working with any families that might consent to me attending an upcoming conference. Despite the focus group participants initially identifying some families, my follow-up emails to the social workers were not responded to.

In the second authority, we jointly agreed a procedure that would identify potential conferences and would be managed by the child protection conference service. Their service had a duty chair who has a conversation with the social worker or manager requesting the conference to establish whether the case had reached the threshold. It was during this conversation that the research was to be discussed. However, this procedure was not applied with any particular consistency and I would receive a flurry of emails in a particular week suggesting that the research had been remembered that week and then there would be weeks of no communication. The second authority was able to identify six potential conferences this way. For two of these the parents were asked but declined. In a further two the social worker had concerns about the vulnerability of the parents and their ability to understand information so they were not asked. In one instance the social worker and team manager did not respond despite being chased by the duty chair and appearing to be on annual leave during the week of the conference. I was able to attend and record the sixth conference.

Table 2 provides details of the three child protection conferences that were audio recorded, the participants and the duration. CPC 2 was longer than the duration of the audio recording as there was a restricted section where confidential information was provided by the police that I was not allowed to record. The conferences in my study were all longer than the longest conferences in the two studies that have recently audio recorded child protection conferences. The longest conference in Koprowska's study (2016) was one hour and 41 minutes, the longest conference in Richardson-Foster's study (2016) was two hours and four minutes.

Table 2: Audio-recordings of child protection conferences

	Participants	Audio duration
Child protection conferences (n=3)		
CPC 1 (review)	8 participants: Chair, 1 social worker, 1 health visitor, 3 teachers, 2 parents	2.19.33
CPC 2 (initial)	12 participants: Chair, 1 social worker, 1 team manager, 1 police, 1 teacher, 1 health visitor, 1 probation, 1 nursery, 1 support charity, 1 relative, 2 parents	2.57.48
CPC 3 (review)	7 participants: Chair, 1 social worker, 1 teacher, 1 learning mentor (school), 1 housing charity, 1 mother, 1 relative	2.14.30

Focus groups and interviews

As with the child protection conferences, the two local authorities took different approaches to arranging focus groups and interviews. One local authority suggested I hold two focus groups in its area because of contrasting geography and residents within the locale. I agreed and the focus groups were easily organised by a leading practitioner in each geographical area who approached individual social workers. In the other authority, participants were obtained through a mass emailing sent by the authority to all children and families social workers inviting them to participate (see Appendix 3). However, the focus group had to be rearranged twice, firstly because of an Ofsted visit and secondly because of scheduling errors on the part of the authority and it finally took place six months after it had first been arranged.

For the interviews, one local authority used a mass emailing (see Appendix 4) to communicate information about the research and identify participants (four social workers). I also approached key senior managers and conference chairs and asked them if they would be willing to be interviewed (three interviews were obtained in this way). In the other local authority, after I had obtained permission to undertake the interviews, I contacted the senior managers of area teams to ask them to provide information about the possibility of being interviewed to the social workers in their areas. Only one of these senior managers confirmed that they had forwarded on the information and the other senior managers did not reply despite repeated attempts to

contact them. I did not receive any communication from any potential participants and unfortunately I was unable to interview any social workers in the second authority. Table 3 provides details of the focus groups and interviews that were carried out such as the participants and their duration.

Table 3: Focus group and interview data

	Participants⁷	Audio duration
Focus groups (n=3)		
Focus group 1	4 social workers	42.00
Focus group 2	4 social workers	1.07.58
Focus group 3	2 social workers, 1 team manager, 1 senior manager	1.35.24
Interviews (n=7)		
Interview 1	Operational manager	30.09
Interview 2	Operational manager	46.41
Interview 3	Social worker	37.50
Interview 4	Senior social worker	39.11
Interview 5	Social worker	37.07
Interview 6	Senior social worker	38.35
Interview 7	Child protection conference chair	1.06.09

Limitations of the study

This study has some limitations relating to the type and range of data that were collected. I was able to gain access to a smaller number of child protection conferences than I had hoped due to the significant access challenges described, although the ones that I was able to attend and audio record were lengthy. A greater number of child protection conferences would have enabled the exploration of a wider range of neglect circumstances and a wider range of combinations of professionals and family composition. None of the child protection conferences I had access to involved the ending of a child protection plan. If I had had access to these types of child protection conferences this would have enabled the exploration of how children, parents and the state are positioned when concerns have reduced and the child/ren is/are no longer considered at risk of significant harm. It would have been useful to carry out interviews with parents to gain their perspectives and gain a

⁷ The interviews and focus groups involved social workers working at different levels and at different stages in their careers. However, given the relatively small number of participants, in the analysis I will predominantly refer to participants more generically as social workers rather than giving specific details about their posts in order to preserve anonymity.

broader perspective on the positioning of children, parents and the state, but this was not possible due to the extensive access challenges that were encountered and the time constraints of a PhD study.

The existing research has established the significance of multimodal resources in the enactment of participation (see Chapter 2). Video data would have enabled the analysis of participation through speech as well as gaze, gesture and body orientation. However, this research was limited to audio data because this was the only type of data that I was given permission to obtain by the local authorities. Specifically in relation to child protection conferences, there are also questions about the appropriateness of video data with regard to participants' feelings about being recorded. In a video recording, individuals are both visually and audibly recognisable and potential research participants may consider that a video recording affords them less privacy than an audio recording. It is possible that participants may have experienced previous negative experiences of video camera use. Moreover, the stakes can often be high in a child protection conference and a feeling of being scrutinised may be exacerbated by the presence of a video camera.

Ethical considerations

There were specific points during the research when ethical issues were particularly salient, such as when obtaining informed consent from participants. However, throughout the research ethical principles were considered and respected. Researching in this area is particularly complex and sensitive involving considerable responsibilities on the part of the researcher (Butler, 2002).

Consent

All participants in the child protection conference needed to give informed consent to be involved in the research. This included obtaining consent from parents and professionals who attended. I also anticipated that there may have been young people attending their own conference (young people are invited to attend the child protection conference if the local authority consider them to be 'competent' i.e. of a sufficient age and understanding) or where young people were not attending I felt that they still needed to give their consent as the conference was about them.

Accordingly, I prepared appropriate information about the research for young people, for parents and for professionals (see Appendix 5).

It is widely agreed that consent to research should be freely given with full knowledge of what is involved in participation and the risk and benefits (British Psychological Society, 2014; British Sociological Association, 2017). However, there are questions about whether consent can ever be fully informed. For example, it can be argued that it is not possible for research participants to know everything about the research project, the research methods and process of the research in the same way that the researcher does so they will never be able to give fully informed consent (Miller & Bell, 2012). Moreover, the focus and trajectory of the research may shift given the dynamic nature of the research process so that consent needs to be re-obtained (Miller & Bell, 2012). This reinforces the need for consent to be understood by the researcher as an ongoing process rather than a one-off event (Miller & Bell, 2012).

Once a potential child protection conference had been identified, the social worker discussed the research with the parents and young person/people if appropriate using the information sheets. These were offered in languages other than English if required. I did not know any identifying details about the family at this stage. The information sheet emphasised that participants were not obligated to take part and the decision to opt-in to the research was entirely theirs. Parents and young people were assured that if they decided not to participate this would not affect any current or future entitlement to services or support from the local authority. If the family was interested in taking part in the research, the local authority then advised me of the details of the child protection conference. It was the intention that professionals who had been invited to attend the conference were contacted in advance by the social worker to ask if they were willing to take part in the research. However, this did not happen consistently. Instead, I often had to provide information about the research to the professionals on the day of the conference whilst we were waiting for it to start. This was not ideal but I had little control over this. In the conference I described the research to the participants and then offered to answer any questions they had. I obtained written informed consent which included consent to audio record the meeting (see Appendix 6).

With regard to the focus groups and interviews, potential participants received information about the research in advance to enable them to decide whether they were interested in taking part in the research. Written informed consent, including consent to audio record, was obtained at the start of the focus groups and interviews (see Appendix 7).

Whilst informed consent was gained at the point of data collection, the process of ensuring participants' consent was an ongoing one. Participants could withdraw from the research during the data collection event or up to six months after the date of the conference, focus group or interview. This did not happen, but if it had I would have erased the relevant audio recording and deleted any subsequent transcription and analysis.

Confidentiality, anonymity and data security

Research participants and local authorities were assured that all information would be kept strictly confidential. All names and identifying information (such as place names, dates of birth, schools and other organisations) were anonymised during transcription so that families, professionals and local authorities could not be identified. This was sensitive research with vulnerable families so it was important to ensure that they could not be identified. Care was taken when selecting extracts to ensure anonymity was preserved, which sometimes involved changing details such as ages. The real names of participants only appeared on the paper consent forms and these were kept in a secure, locked store at the University of Warwick as was the code sheet that linked participants and the anonymised identifiers that were used to label electronic files. Audio files and transcripts were stored on a secure drive within the University's filestore that only I had access to and were identified using the anonymised identifiers. All audio files were deleted from the audio recording device as soon as they had been transferred to the secure drive.

Involving service users

The importance of involving service users in research is emphasised in Butler's Code of Ethics for Social Work and Social Care Research (Butler, 2002), a principle which is commensurate with social work's advocacy of respect for service users and

promotion of their rights (BASW, 2012). There are different kinds of service user involvement in research which exist on a continuum (Beresford, 2005), with different levels being appropriate for different studies (Hanley *et al.*, 2003). Whilst this study was not intended to be a user-controlled study, I endeavoured to involve service users in the design of the study where possible.

The information sheets for young people and for parents for the child protection conferences needed to be accessible and appropriate. Therefore, I sought to consult with service users (parents and young people who had had experiences of the care system) on the design of these materials such as the wording, content and layout.

It was particularly important to involve young people's groups in the design of research materials that were clear and informative for them. Advice was sought from young people who performed the role of advocates or ambassadors for children in care one of the local authorities. All of these young people had had experiences of the care system and were part of a pre-existing group that enables young people to shape services locally. The young people provided very helpful feedback on the young people's leaflet regarding layout, colour and design.

Accessing the views of parents who had had experiences of the child protection system was significantly more difficult. Initially, the University's service for involving the public and patients in research sent out a request for service user involvement to their database of members who are interested in being involved in research and teaching. This produced only one response from a local agency that supports adults with learning difficulties. This agency was interested in helping with the research but in the event were too busy to help despite offering of a variety of flexible options. Secondly, a parent was contacted through social media who has past experience of the child protection system and now runs a training and consultancy company where she works to bridge the gap between the social worker and service user. However, she was also unable to help. Thirdly, I contacted two charities (one national, one local) who support parents involved in the care system or care proceedings and asked if they were in touch with any parents who might be able to work with me in an advisory capacity and give some feedback on the consent procedures and information leaflet. Unfortunately, there was no response from either

charity, perhaps reflecting the increasing demands placed on them in a context of cuts to voluntary sector funding coupled with a greater need for their services in a climate of austerity.

I was able to obtain some feedback on the parent information sheet from a member of University staff who is a parent of a disabled child and has ongoing involvement with a children's services children with disabilities team. This staff member had experiences of attending multi-professional meetings in relation to their child (although had no experience of the child protection system). She reviewed the information sheet and felt that it had a warm tone and used straightforward language without being 'dumbed down'. She recommended a few small changes and these were made.

Research with vulnerable participants

In addition to the consent procedures outlined above, there were further ethical considerations in conducting research with vulnerable participants. The families involved may have had significant difficult and negative life experiences involving (multiple) forms of oppression. The discussion in child protection conferences covers sensitive issues such as actual or potential harm to children, parenting capacity and the family's circumstances (such as mental health problems, domestic violence and criminal convictions). Being asked to be involved in a research project that involves audio recording the conference may have made parents feel their parenting was under additional scrutiny. The research also involved some young people as they were the ones being discussed at the conference and there was the potential for some to attend part of the conference. Therefore, this research was committed to protecting participants and ensuring that research procedures were tailored to those that were involved. I also retained an awareness of issues of disempowerment if service users are not given the opportunity to participate in research (Westlake & Forrester, 2016) and of research that indicates that participants may find involvement in research beneficial even if it causes them distress at the time (Decker *et al.*, 2011; Disch, 2001; Jacomb *et al.*, 1999; Westlake & Forrester, 2016).

Not all families where a child protection conference was due to be held were suitable for inclusion in the research because they may have been particularly vulnerable (including those with learning difficulties or mental health problems who may not have been able to give fully informed consent) or experiencing high levels of emotional distress. There may have been circumstances when participation would cause the family a high level of anxiety or would affect children's services' work with the family. Therefore, the local authority used its discretion in deciding whether it was appropriate to ask individual parents and young people whether they would be interested in taking part in the research. Indeed, as discussed above, in one local authority two conferences that had been identified were subsequently excluded from the research as the social workers felt that the parents were particularly vulnerable. However, there is an argument that the potential risk of harm of being involved in research may be overstated (Westlake & Forrester, 2016) and that making decisions on behalf of service users is oppressive, takes power away from them and prevents them from having a view on practice (Becker-Blease & Freyd, 2006). Whilst the local authority was essential in facilitating the research, it also meant that, in their role as a gatekeeper, they had control over who received information about the research which is a challenge when working with gatekeepers (Barbour, 2014).

As stated above, there was the potential for young people to attend at least part of their child protection conference if the local authority considered them to be of an appropriate age and understanding. There is a lack of research in this area, but the available research suggests that children and young people do not often attend conferences and their participation in the conference process, in whatever form might be appropriate, could be improved (Cossar *et al.*, 2016; Sanders & Mace, 2006). Whilst young people did not attend any of the conferences that I observed, I was prepared for that possibility. I was aware that I would need to take particular care when involving this group in the research, ensuring that they had the opportunity to understand what the research involved and decide in their own time whether they wanted to take part. I was prepared for any discussion of the research to be tailored to the needs of the individual young person. For example, a young person may have wanted to involve parents in the discussion or they may have wanted to discuss with a professional they knew to help them make a decision.

Protecting participants from harm

It is important to identify potential risks to participants of being involved in research. The difficulty with child protection conferences in particular is that they have the potential to be an emotive and distressing situation for families regardless of this research taking place. Moreover, families are likely to be anxious in the period before the conference (Farmer & Owen, 1995; Ghaffar *et al.*, 2011), the same period in which the research would be discussed. I attended to the demeanour of family members when I talked to them about the research before the conference and would have had further discussions with them about being involved in the research if they appeared particularly emotionally distressed, although this did not happen. Whilst it is unlikely that any distress observed in the child protection conferences would have been directly attributable to the research, it is possible that the presence of the researcher and recording device could have made participants feel that they were being additionally scrutinised. Therefore, participants always had the opportunity to withdraw from the research during the conference or ask me to leave or turn the recording device off temporarily. Some parents did become distressed during the child protection conferences because of what was being discussed. This was managed sensitively by the chairs, but I was always prepared to offer to leave or turn the recording device off.

I was also aware that there could be potential risks for participants in the focus groups and interviews. Whilst this was much less likely to happen as the participants were experienced social workers and used to talking about their cases with colleagues and in supervision, there was always the possibility that the nature of the discussion would raise unexpected issues and feelings. I was prepared to stop interviews or focus groups if needed and to discuss sources of support with participants if this seemed appropriate.

Valuing the contribution of participants

Participants were thanked verbally on the day of the child protection conference, focus group or interview. Where possible, I also emailed focus group and interview participants several days later reiterating my thanks and asking if they had any questions about the research or had any other thoughts they would like to add. For the child protection conferences, I emailed the social worker after the conference

thanking them again for their participation and for their assistance with involving the family with the research. I also asked the social worker to pass on my thanks to the family and advised that I was available if the social worker or the family had any further questions about the research.

I had a particularly reciprocal relationship with one local authority and have disseminated some initial findings to this local authority and have been involved in some training for professionals.

Being a researcher – positionality and reflexivity

Reflexivity refers to the continuous process of critique and critical reflection regarding the knowledge, experiences and beliefs that the researcher brings to the research and which shape the research (Berger, 2015). In this study, reflexivity was promoted through keeping a research diary, supervision meeting and peer discussions.

One aspect of reflexivity is how the researcher views the impact of the researcher on data collection and on the research process as a whole. In terms of observational and audio recorded data, it is possible that the presence of a researcher will have an effect on the interaction that takes place, known as ‘reactivity’ (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007) or the Hawthorne effect. Data that is not affected in this way can only be collected when the researcher is not observing (Sarangi, 2019). However, the researcher has two options in terms of how they theorise and respond to this paradox. If the researcher views this as having a negative effect on the data and as problematic, they might try and reduce their impact on the research situation or account for it in the analysis (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). The reasoning that underlies this approach is positivism and its quest for neutral, objective data. Alternatively, the researcher could approach the issue of ‘reactivity’ as unproblematic and it is this approach that I take. Whilst researchers have illustrated that the suitability of talk for recording is interactionally oriented to and negotiated (Heath *et al.*, 2010; Hutchby *et al.*, 2012; Speer & Hutchby, 2003), research also reveals that the influence of the recording device is highly variable and not always negative. For example, Speer and Hutchby (2003) found that a recording device can

be a facilitator of talk and can also be used as a way of interactionally managing problematic areas of talk. Consequently, I understand the influence of the presence of the researcher and recording device as just one of many influences on the interaction that takes place. Additionally, professionals involved in the research will have prior experience of observations of practice in a variety of situations. For example, internal evaluations of their practice and external observation by Ofsted.

In terms of the interviews and focus groups, they were events constructed specifically for the purposes of the research. As discussed above, I understand the researcher as an active co-constructor of knowledge in these interactional events and therefore did not feel it was necessary to attempt to reduce any type of ‘bias’ in the interviews or focus groups. However, this does not mean that researchers should not reflect on what they bring to the situation and how the participants view them (Berger, 2015).

In terms of my own position, I am not a social worker or a member of another child-focused profession yet I have extensive experience as a child welfare researcher and have published in this area meaning I have researcher but not practitioner knowledge of the area. My position as a researcher but not a practitioner was generally accepted and welcomed by professionals but I did have one experience when a professional told me that only a qualified social worker should be doing this research. This raises questions about who potential research participants consider to be ‘legitimate’ researchers in a particular field and is an example of the negotiated nature of power relationships within the research process (Angouri, 2018).

Generally, it appeared that professional participants were accepting of my positioning as an experienced researcher without practice experience. Perhaps because of my research background, the social workers used common professional terms in the interviews and focus groups without explaining them further, assuming that I knew what they meant. This demonstrates that, in one way, they were positioning me as a knowledgeable insider (Labaree, 2002) who was able to understand and make sense of profession-specific talk. I also contributed to that positioning by foregrounding my previous research experience in information sheets

about the research and at the start of the interviews and focus groups and by signalling interactionally that I understood the technical terms that were being used.

There is also the positioning of the participants to consider. By asking professional participants to take part in interviews and focus groups I was positioning them as valuable contributors to the research. Yet because of the constructed nature of interviews and focus groups, participants had to actively position themselves as competent professionals (amongst other things); something that I also actively contributed to. Commensurate with a social constructionist approach, I understood the identities of the participants in the interviews and focus groups (including myself) as multiple and enacted rather than static and presupposed (Angouri & Marra, 2011; De Fina, 2010).

I only came into contact with parents during the child protection conferences. These events were considerably more interactionally complex than the interviews and focus groups. I will now briefly discuss my own positioning in relation to the child protection conferences with specific reference to the parents. The parents received information about the research which included information about my current status as a student studying for a higher degree and about my previous history as a researcher. Again, through this information I was positioning myself as a competent researcher, yet I was aware that parents may have viewed me in other ways. Firstly, the research was endorsed by the local authority that was concerned about the care of their children and this may have meant that viewed me as collaborating in this scrutiny. This is particularly relevant to child protection conferences because they involve the sanctioning of state intervention into private family lives and can be a precursor to care proceedings which could ultimately result in significant changes to where the child lives and to who has/shares parental responsibility for the child. During the conference I positioned myself as an outsider to the event in line with how participants might expect a researcher to behave. For example, I did not contribute verbally to the conference and I asked the chair where I should sit (in contrast to professionals who self-selected where they should sit). I felt it was important to position myself in this way because I wanted to respect the seriousness of the meeting.

Bumps in the road: Reflections on the process of accessing and collecting data

It is not uncommon for researchers in child protection and child welfare to experience significant ethical and practical challenges in carrying out research with and about vulnerable people (Munro *et al.*, 2005). Data from child protection conferences is significantly difficult to access and other studies have encountered similar challenges to those that I experienced. Richardson-Foster's study (2016), a PhD, was a collaborative study in conjunction with two LSCBs who part funded the studentship. The study had been designed by the LSCBs and a University staff member prior to the student beginning the research and there was a clear commitment from the LSCBs to support and facilitate the research. The researcher specifically identifies the significance of this collaboration: 'a major resource and advantage given problems with researcher access to the 'black box' of statutory child protection meetings and decisions' (Richardson-Foster, 2016 pg. 76). Despite the assistance of the LSCBs, the research collected audio data from only one of the LSCB areas and obtained a sample size of 14 over the course of eight months, of which only three were initial child protection conferences. The researcher had to adapt the research design to include review conferences because of the slow pace of recruitment when only initial child protection conferences were the focus. Koprowska's study (2016) included only initial child protection conferences. This study involved one of the few local authorities in the country known to make audio recordings of child protection conferences for their own purposes (to aid minute writing and resolve disputes). Therefore, in this local authority audio recording child protection conferences was routine practice. However, despite its commonality, the researcher was only able to gain consent to access 18% of recordings that took place within a nine-month period (a sample size of 12). These two studies demonstrate that despite factors being present that facilitated data collection (the LSCB acting as facilitator; audio recording conferences being commonplace) there were still significant challenges in collecting data. These facilitating factors were not present in my study making the challenges of collecting data even greater.

The adaptations and amendments to the research design and methods and to the process of data collection that were made during the course of the research were necessary in order to collect an appropriate quantity and quality of data within the timescales available. Consequently, the process of accessing and collecting data

required a flexible mindset and a creative approach to navigating the challenges encountered. Whilst the eventual research design was quite different from the one that was initially envisaged, the inclusion of focus groups and interviews enabled the exploration of the construction of approaches to working with children, parents and families and of relationships between children, parents and the state across multiple contexts.

I also wanted to reflect on my experiences of data collection. Whilst the data collected, particularly the interviews and focus groups, included descriptions of children's experiences of neglect and other types of abuse which were distressing to hear, I was personally able to cope with hearing these descriptions, in part because of my extensive previous research experience in the area. What was most challenging was how physically exhausting the process of attending the child protection conferences was. The heightened anxiety due to the uncertainty that I would actually be allowed to attend and record the conference on the day coupled with the need for intense concentration during these lengthy meetings would render me exhausted for the rest of the day and left me thinking about how intense a process it must be for those involved, especially for the parents with the stress resulting from their lives being scrutinised and the fear that their children might be removed (further down the line).

Data analysis

This section outlines the interactional sociolinguistics analytic approach used and the process of analysing the focus group and interview data and the child protection conferences data.

Analytic framework: Interactional sociolinguistics

The social constructionist epistemology underpinning this research means that meanings and versions of events and selves are considered to be produced and legitimated in and through social interaction. In line with this, the child protection conferences, the interviews and the focus groups were understood as co-constructed interactional events involving accounts and versions that are specifically constructed for that event rather than as objective representations of reality. Congruent with these

considerations, interactional sociolinguistics is the main analytic approach used in this thesis to frame the analysis of the data. Interactional sociolinguistics is an approach to studying situated meaning (Schiffrin, 1994). It focuses on language use in face-to-face interaction but considers language alone as insufficient to convey meaning (Jaspers, 2012; Roberts & Sarangi, 2005). Therefore, it gives significance to the role of context in meaning making and attempts to connect wider contextual and structural factors including norms, ideologies and discourses with what happens at the immediate local level of interaction (Angouri, 2018; Gumperz, 2015). Consequently, interactional sociolinguistics sees context as ‘both *brought along* and *brought about* in a situated encounter’ (Sarangi & Roberts, 1999, pg. 30, emphasis in original).

Whilst interactional sociolinguistics derives from a variety of disciplines including ethnography, pragmatics and linguistics (Jaspers, 2012), it emerged primarily from the work of Gumperz (1982, 1999, 2015). However, Goffman’s work also contributed to the development of interactional sociolinguistics. Through his study of face-to-face interaction, Goffman identified the routine and organised nature of talk and proposed that there is an interaction order which enables face-to-face interaction to proceed (Goffman, 1983). One aspect of Goffman’s work that is particularly relevant to interactional sociolinguistics is his idea of ‘frames’ as reference points for understanding what is going on in interaction (Goffman, 1974). A frame is a set of expectations and concepts that provide interactants with a focus for understanding what is happening in an interaction (Candlin *et al.*, 2017; Tannen, 1993). Gumperz also focuses on the significance of background information to aid interpretation. He argues that context and other background knowledge are key resources for interpreting communicative intent (Gumperz, 1999). This contextual and background knowledge, or contextual presuppositions, is invoked by contextualisation cues which signal to interlocutors how what is said should be interpreted (Gumperz, 2015; Holmes & Stubbe, 2015). Contextualisation cues are features of the message which allow inferences to be made about what the speaker intended to convey (Stubbe *et al.*, 2003). These cues are verbal and non-verbal signs which can occur at different levels and can include, for example, features of production such as dialect, prosody, lexical and syntactic choices, and conversational features such as ‘openings, closings and sequencing strategies’ (Gumperz, 1982, pg. 131). This connection between

linguistic signs and aspects of the social context is known as indexicality (De Fina *et al.*, 2006; Jaspers, 2012). The combination of both Goffman and Gumperz's work has resulted in an interactional sociolinguistics approach that understands how meaning is created at an interactional level by drawing on macro-level social meanings (Schiffrin, 1996).

Because of its focus on face-to-face interaction, interactional sociolinguistics draws on the techniques of conversation analysis in its detailed analysis of interaction (Holmes & Wilson, 2017). Conversation analysis' understanding of the turn-taking system and its focus on the organised and sequential nature of interaction are aspects of the approach that are useful to interactional sociolinguistics as is the principle of considering participants' orientations to the immediately preceding interaction. However, interactional sociolinguistics and conversation analysis differ when it comes to matters of context (Holmes & Wilson, 2017; Stubbe *et al.*, 2003). Generally, conversation analysts do not generally draw on external contextual information in their analyses unless it is made explicitly relevant by participants (although there is some debate in the field, see the Schegloff/Wetherell/Billig debate). In contrast, interactional sociolinguistics makes the wider sociocultural context and ethnographic information explicitly relevant to understanding utterances.

An interactional sociolinguistics analytical approach was considered appropriate for this research because I was interested in the approaches to working with children, parents and families that were constructed and negotiated interactionally. Yet this does not occur in a vacuum. Interactants will bring to interactional events institutional frameworks for understanding child protection, ideals about the work and about the child protection profession and wider macrosocial contextual information. In this study, this bridging of the macro and micro levels is particularly applicable to the connections between the socio-political context described in Chapter 1 and the process of dis/engaging the parents in the child protection process via the child protection conference. Therefore, it is interactional sociolinguistics' focus on the relevance of contextual information to understanding meaning making in talk that was central to the choice of this analytical approach.

Process of data analysis

I approached the analysis of the interviews and focus groups and the child protection conferences in different, but complementary, ways. As I was interested in the content of what was constructed interactionally about neglect and child protection work and the families that are involved in child protection within the interviews and focus groups, thematic analysis was used. The focus of the analysis of the child protection conferences was the interactional accomplishment of participation and so interactional analysis was used. Therefore, both approaches to analysis were commensurate with the overarching aim of the research which was to understand the approaches to working with children, parents and families when there are concerns about neglect that are constructed in and through interaction, attending to the relationships between children, parents and the state that are constructed interactionally.

In order to begin the analysis, the data were transcribed in order to provide a representation of the interaction to be used for analysis in conjunction with the audio recording, with an awareness that transcription is a process of representation and selection that has limits with regards to its ability to portray all features of interaction (Bucholtz, 2000). The data were transcribed verbatim with some interactional features included such as pauses and overlapping talk (Appendix 8).

The first step in the coding and analysis of the data was iterative, involving immersion in the data through repeated listening to the recordings and reading of the transcripts. This was done separately for each data set (the conferences, the focus groups and the interviews) but at different times according to when the transcriptions were completed. The purpose at this point was to become intimately familiar with the data and to focus on what was said and how it was said (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It was also an opportunity to start noting down initial thoughts and ideas about what the data might be showing. The qualitative analysis software NVivo was used to aid the data analysis, but also hard copies of the transcripts were marked up and annotated as this was a more portable way of analysing the data that could be undertaken when commuting or when away from a computer (see Appendix 9 for a sample of coding).

The remaining (iterative) steps differed for the analysis of the interviews and focus groups and the analysis of the child protection conferences. The process of data analysis both during and after the fieldwork and insights from the analysis of each type of data informed the analysis of the other.

Thematic analysis of interviews and focus groups

The focus of the thematic analysis was to consider the kinds of approaches to working with children, parents and families that were constructed in social workers' accounts of their practice and the associated ways of positioning children, parents and the state. The analysis also attended to how any tensions between these approaches were navigated. Crucial to the analysis, and in line with an interactional sociolinguistics approach, was examining the resources used by interactants to index contextual information, role responsibilities and ideals about their work. The aim of the analysis was to connect the talk at the interactional level with wider social and ideological meanings and assumptions. In this way, wider social and institutional understandings about neglect and abuse and parenting informed the analysis. The talk in the interviews and focus groups was not just about descriptions of practice and cases that were being constructed for the immediate interactional context, it also indexed wider social, professional and institutional values, discourses about children and childhood, and expectations of parents including their roles and their behaviours. The analysis also kept in mind the approach to understanding the interview and focus group events (outlined above) as occasions where understandings are constructed by participants for the purpose of the interview and are not neutral reflections of inner beliefs and experiences.

The initial analysis of the interview and focus group data involved the identification of key themes within the data. In order to do this, I drew on the strategies advocated by Coffey and Atkinson (1996) and Braun and Clarke (2006) in their approaches to analysing qualitative data. Initially, the interviews and focus groups were analysed separately, but as the analysis developed, they were analysed together as they both contained instances where social workers described their own practice and families that they worked with. The first step was to undertake initial coding of the data. This stage was inductive. Codes are a way of labelling sections of the data according to what is of interest or significance to the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and can

be in the form of a simple, descriptive label or a more theoretical or conceptual one (Miles *et al.*, 2014). Coding is also a way of linking together segments of data according to their similarities (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996) so that the researcher can collate extracts that relate to a particular concept or theme (Miles *et al.*, 2014). Sections of the data were coded for what was said at the descriptive level but also for the wider contextual information that was being indexed in line with an interactional sociolinguistics approach. Codes were expanded, refined, modified or combined with other codes as the analysis developed. The data were coded a number of times after a particular feature of the data or conceptual idea became significant; it was important to go back and code all of the data again for this feature or concept.

The next step, which was also iterative, was to explore the codes in greater depth and examine how different codes connected with each other and how codes could be combined under themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). The aim was to look for broader connecting concepts or themes and sub-themes which explained how social workers talked about and understood child protection work and the families that they were involved with (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Exceptions and contrasts were also explored as well as regularities and patterns. Themes were expanded, refined, modified or combined with other codes as the analysis developed. Concept maps were drawn which allowed me to interrogate how themes were connected. Coffey and Atkinson (1996 pg. 49) emphasise the importance of ‘asking oneself questions about the data’ at this stage of the analysis.

As the analysis developed, it became more focused and looked specifically at how ideals of social work with children and families are negotiated in and through interaction. For the purposes of this thesis, ideals are considered to be organising constructs that reflect commonly held views and assumptions about the aims of social work practice with children and families and approaches to working with children, parents and families. They embody expectations about the relationships between children, parents and the state. The carefully chosen excerpts presented in the analysis illustrate the patterns identified in the data.

Analysis of the child protection conferences

The focus of the analysis of the child protection conferences was the nature and extent of parents' and professionals' participation, connecting the ways in which different participants in child protection conferences participate in the interaction with broader approaches to working with parents and families. Informed by the conceptualisation of participation and the relevant interactional features described in Chapter 2, the organisation of turn-taking and its sequential properties was the core focus of the analysis. In considering participation, I was interested in how interactants gained access to the floor and how the floor was managed to enable or restrict the production of versions of events, actions and people. I also considered the interactional resources, such as questions and formulations, used by participants to influence the content and direction of the interaction. I examined the uptake of the versions that were produced; how they were (not) validated or (not) accepted within the sequential management of the interaction. Here my focus was linguistic features that indicated agreement or disagreement, evaluative talk, response tokens and subsequent turns that construct alternative versions. The close connection between participation and the enactment and negotiation of roles, status, expertise, responsibilities and power identified in Chapter 2 was also explored in the analysis. The nature and extent of participation of both parents and professionals was considered, specifically focusing on the differential distribution of interactional resources and how authority was negotiated (or not) and making connections with role expectations and entitlements that exist beyond the immediate interactional event.

Quality in qualitative research

It is important to be able to determine the quality of any piece of research whether it uses a quantitative, qualitative or mixed methodology. The concepts of reliability and validity are used to evaluate quantitative research but there is debate about the applicability of these concepts to qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) because of their realist assumptions. Alternative approaches to evaluating the quality of qualitative research have been proposed. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest trustworthiness and authenticity as two criteria for assessing the quality of qualitative research. Whilst authenticity concerns the transformative and

emancipatory impact of the research, it is less often discussed and is more controversial (Bryman, 2012). I will now briefly comment on trustworthiness and how I have attempted to ensure the quality of this research. At a broad level, this chapter attempts to provide a detailed and transparent account of how the data was collected and analysed and of the methodological and analytical decisions made along the way. In terms of how data is presented in subsequent chapters, Potter and Hepburn (2005) emphasise the importance of presenting extracts that detail how the section of talk being analysed was interactionally produced and of including the interviewer's turns in the presentation of interview data so that the reader can see the context in which the talk was produced. This is the approach that I follow so that sufficient information is provided for the reader to make an assessment of the credibility and plausibility of my claims. I also considered deviant cases when undertaking the analysis as they can highlight that a particular pattern is not as regular as expected or they can actually validate a particular pattern if the subsequent interaction is significantly different (i.e. there is interactional 'trouble') from the other similar cases (Hepburn & Potter, 2004). During the analysis of the data, feedback on my analytical findings was provided firstly by my supervisors and also by the wider academic and practice community when I presented emerging findings at academic conferences and to practitioners and managers. This feedback from peers was an important contributor to the quality of the research.

Conclusion

To conclude, this chapter has described and evaluated the theoretical and epistemological principles informing the research and has considered the ways in which these principles shape the research focus, the methods, the ethical considerations, and the analytical approach. I have also outlined in detail the processes of gaining access to sites and of collecting and analysing the data. Throughout the chapter I have emphasised my careful and ethical approach to collecting data about this sensitive topic and to working with vulnerable families. In the following two chapters I present the findings which were derived from the application of these methods and analytic framework.

Chapter 4: The construction of the ideals of social work with children and families

Chapter 1 explored contemporary child protection policy and practice and its origins, identifying a contemporary child welfare system that has become increasingly orientated towards child protection rather than family support. It also argued that there is an increasing responsibilisation of parents. This first findings chapter examines the approaches to working with families, in the context of the complexity of neglect, that are constructed and negotiated at the interactional level. It also considers how these connect to broader understandings of the relationship between children, parents and the state. This chapter draws on the data from the interviews and focus groups. Specifically, it explores how social workers, in accounts of their practice, construct and negotiate the ideals of social work with children and families in relation to child neglect. It also considers how children, parents and social workers are positioned within these ideals. In doing so, the analysis extends our understanding of how approaches to working with families are constructed in and through interaction and how any tensions between these ways of positioning children, parents and the state are navigated.

As previously discussed, ideals are considered to be organising constructs that reflect commonly held views and assumptions about the aims of social work practice with children and families. They embody expectations about the relationships between children, parents, families and social workers. The ideals emerged from a thematic analysis of the data but are closely connected to the tensions and debates about contemporary child protection examined in Chapter 1. These ideals are actively produced in interaction and therefore choices are made about whether, and in what ways, ideals are mobilised in the unfolding interaction. In my data, social workers invoked the ideals flexibly in order to provide coherent accounts for particular cases or events. Therefore, social workers engage in an active process of knowledge construction when they talk about their work. However, whilst the specific ideals that are mobilised by the social workers are situated in the specific interactional event, they also reflect the pre-existing conceptualisations of this type of social work. Chapter 1 identified the different perspectives, such as child protection and family

support, that co-exist to varying degrees in contemporary systems and practices and historically. Elements of these different perspectives are indexed in the social workers' talk.

Within the focus groups and interviews, the social workers' talk about their work with families when there were concerns about child neglect was a key site for the negotiation of the ideals of social work with children and families. An interactional sociolinguistic analysis of the data elucidated the diverse ways in which social workers confronted, (re)produced and navigated professional ideals in relation to child neglect. The analysis specifically examined how versions of events, actions and people were constructed in terms of the norms and ideals that were drawn upon, who produced them and how speakers positioned themselves and others within the descriptions of concerns about child neglect and of practice. It also considered how social workers negotiated dilemmas, conflicts and tensions between ideals. Drawing on research that considers how assessments are accomplished in talk and how behaviours and perspectives are problematised through contrast structures (Pomerantz, 1984; Smith, 1978), particular attention was paid to positive or negative evaluative elements of contributions, contrastive work and talk that emphasised the benefits or negatives of particular actions or situations.

The following four ideals that were identified through the analysis: protection from (risk of) harm, family preservation, working in partnership with families and the appropriateness of the intervention to the circumstances. They are represented in Figure 1.

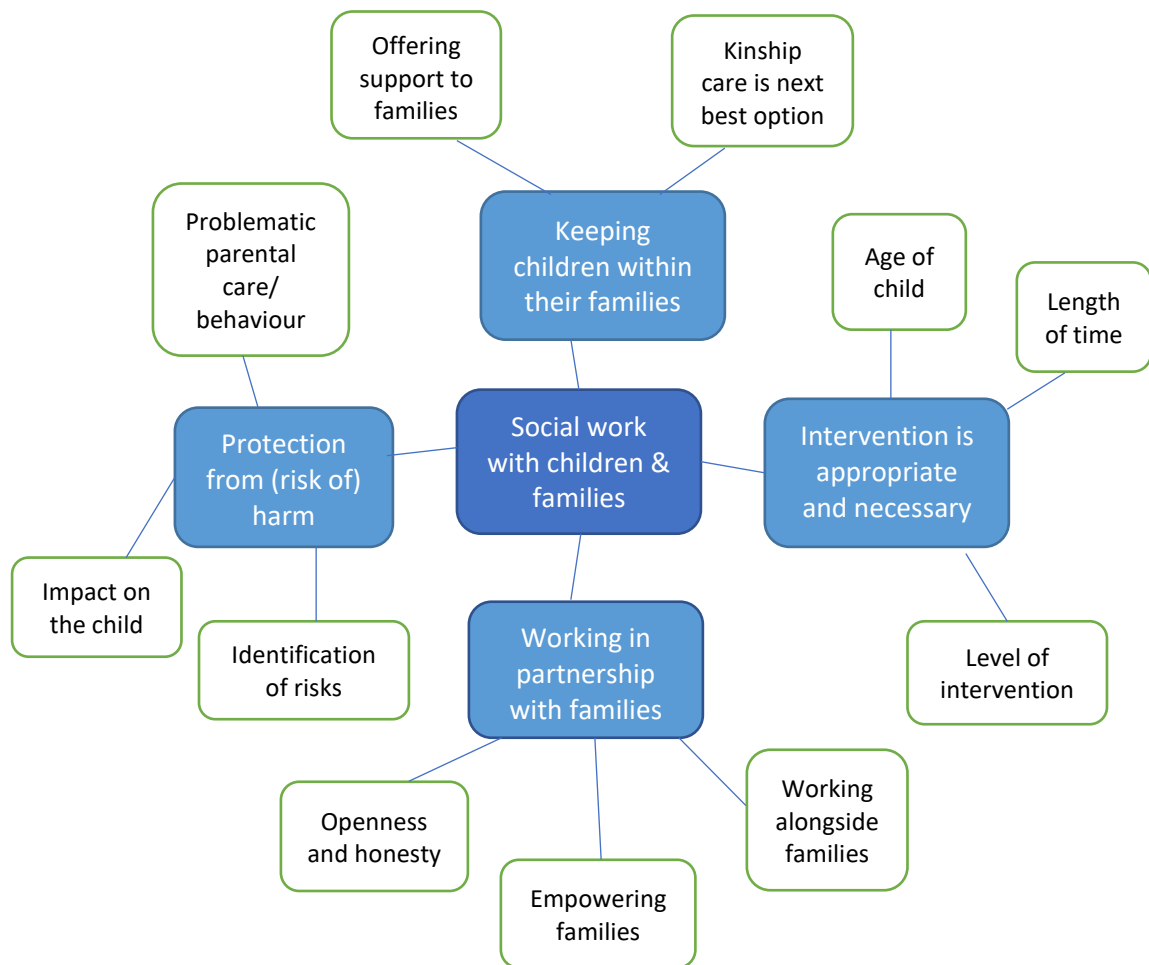


Figure 1: The ideals of social work with children and families

This chapter examines how these ideals are mobilised in interaction by identifying from the data concepts that are used to reflect the ideals. The ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm is indexed through social workers' talk about the impact of neglect (and sometimes other forms of abuse) on the child, through the problematisation of parents' care or behaviour and also through social workers' identification of risks to children. Consequently, a need for action on the part of the institution is created. These aspects of the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm are sometimes talked about in isolation but also they could be talked about in combination in order to mobilise this ideal. When social workers talk about offering parents support and opportunities to make changes and when they identify kinship care as the next best option, they mobilise the ideal of keeping children in their

families. The ideal of working in partnership with families is mobilised through social workers' talk about honesty and openness, working alongside families and empowering families. Lastly, talk that is about matching the intervention to the needs of the child and family in terms of the age of the child, the level of intervention and the length of time that children's services are involved for indexes the ideal of intervention that is appropriate and necessary.

In the descriptions about their work produced by social workers, they position themselves, the child and the parents. This is because the underpinning ideals contain assumptions about the aims of practice, children's needs and rights, the roles and responsibilities of parents and the role of the state in relation to the family. Therefore, the social workers position parents and children in certain ways depending on the account being given. The analysis also attends to how the ideals of social work with children and families are used by the social workers as resources for self-positioning. Consequently, this chapter will examine how children, parents and social workers are positioned within the ideals that are mobilised and therefore how broader approaches to working with children, parents and families that embody values and conceptualisations regarding the rights, roles and responsibilities of children, parents, families and the state are (re)produced in interaction.

Whilst the ideals were identified as discrete themes in the analysis, they are not straightforward. They could be contradictory, contested and some were more dominant than others. A specific focus of the analysis was how the ideals of social work with children and families are negotiated in interaction and specifically how tensions and differences between them were managed. The analysis attends to how ideals are prioritised through contrasts that are made with other perspectives or the views of others, how ideals can be used to account for the legitimacy of other ideals and how they are used as explanations for when exceptions are made to ideals. The analysis demonstrates an ordering of these ideals: the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm dominates within the social worker's accounts. When other ideals are talked about concurrently with the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm, it was this ideal that is prioritised over others. The dominance of the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm is also evident in its utility as a resource

for constructing the legitimacy of some ideals or as accounting for the rejection of other ideals in certain circumstances.

Protection from (risk of) harm

The introduction of the Children Act 1989 (plus subsequent amendments) provided a mandate for protecting children from harm (balanced against a partnership approach to working with families – see later) and emphasised a focus on the child's welfare through the paramountcy principle (Children Act 1989, 2004). Duties under the Children Acts to protect children from harm include carrying out a section 47 investigation if there are concerns that a child is suffering or likely to be suffering significant harm and holding a child protection conference if a child is assessed as being at risk of significant harm. If the local authority has sufficient concerns about significant harm to a child, they can instigate care proceedings to obtain a care order which means they are given parental responsibility (shared with parents) and can make decisions about where a child lives for example. The Children Acts codify the relationship between the state (and consequently the social worker) and the family when there are concerns about (potential) harm to the child in terms of the state's safeguarding responsibilities and duties to intervene (Fox Harding, 1991a). Here the power of the state is evident. Additionally, the definition of significant harm within the Children Act 1989 attributes responsibility to parents for their actions or inactions. Within this ideal, child protection and the management of risk dominate, reflecting the contemporary context which is increasingly orientated towards authoritarian intervention with other aspects of the social work role, such as family support, pushed to the periphery (Parton, 2014; Parton & Williams, 2017) (see Chapter 1). Within this ideal (and reflecting the content of primary legislation), parents are positioned as a (potential) risk to children. This connects with a broader family policy narrative that responsabilises parents and marginalises various forms of adversity which can impact on families and which are particularly relevant in relation to child neglect (see Chapter 1).

This section considers extracts where the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm was evident in the focus group and interview data. The extracts presented here are representative of patterns that occurred across the data and also reflect points

where divergence was noted. The latter is important as ideals are negotiated in situ and can be prioritised or marginalised. The analysis shows that the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm is indexed by descriptions and assessments of the impact of child neglect (and sometimes other types of abuse) on the child, by problematising the care provided by parents or their behaviour (with minimal recognition of the social and structural factors that impact on parents) and by the identification of risks to children. These factors are inter-related and were present in various combinations to index ideal the of protecting children from (risk of) harm. These aspects of the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm were mobilised within the interaction to formulate problems and situations that demanded some sort of action or intervention to take place. The construction of the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm also worked to position children, parents and social workers/the institution through their connections with the aspects of the ideal. Children were positioned as vulnerable and as having been harmed or being at risk of harm, parents were positioned as providing care that was problematic in some way and were implicitly or explicitly identified as culpable. Through the construction of an imperative for action, social workers and the institution were positioned as responsible for taking action to protect the child. In the data, the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm is prioritised over other ideals or perspectives which are explicitly rejected as a result of contrastive work.

The first extract illustrates how the impact on the child and the problematisation of the parents' care indexes the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm⁸.

Extract 4.1

Focus group 2

233 SW1 Basic care needs not being clean an- and fed and
 234 stuff like that it was more around their emotional
 235 their educational needs weren't being prioritised
 236 erm yeah domestic violence mum had mental health
 237 issues and yeah these these children but this little
 238 one with autism (.)his needs in respect of his
 239 disability weren't being met so he was erm (.) at
 240 the time I worked with him I started working with
 241 him when he was three and he was completely erm you
 242 know sort of like in nappies day had er would only

⁸ Please note, in this thesis all professionals are referred to as female in order to ensure the anonymity of the small number of male professionals who took part in the research.

243 eat certain types of pureed baby food and only if
 244 they were orange all of this you know stuff they
 245 were on a child protection plan for two years no
 246 changes were being made erm so we went into care
 247 proceedings and we removed him and that child is now
 248 seven erm and I've just stopped working with him
 249 cause he's been just been adopted by his foster
 250 carers and he can now count to ten in Spanish
 251 SW2 .hhh ((laugh))
 252 SW1 Erm and so you know sort of like how much of the
 253 early stuff that he couldn't do was about
 254 SW2 neglect
 255 SW1 [environmental neglect of his needs
 256 SW3 [Neglect rather than his autism
 257 SW1 Cause actually with carers who are able to give him
 258 that stimulation that he needs he's thrived

SW1's description of this family contrasts the development of the autistic child and the family environment when the child was living with the parents with his progress and the care he received after he went to live with foster carers. This contrastive work accomplished in the social worker's talk functions to establish impact on the child and problematises the parents' care. Consequently, the ideal of protection of children from (risk of) harm is indexed. Contrast structures (Smith, 1978) are often used to provide context for framing a particular action or behaviour as deviating from the norm. In this extract, impact on the child is constructed through the social worker's references to the needs of the child/ren not being met (lines 233-4 and lines 238-9) and to concerns about the autistic child's development (lines 233-44). The social worker also discusses the impact of the neglect on the child with autism in terms of things that he was unable to do (lines 252-5). These descriptions could be sufficient to demonstrate an impact on the child on their own but are reinforced through the social worker's emphasis on the significant changes in the child's development after he went to live with foster carers. The autistic child's early progress (lines 240-244) is contrasted with his current abilities (line 250). Consequently, constructing a clear impact on the child establishes their experiences as problematic and therefore a need for the child to be protected, representing a common pattern in the data.

The problematisation of parental care or behaviour was a prominent feature across the interview and focus group data. In this extract, the contrastive work also constructs the parents' care as unsatisfactory and implicitly assigns responsibility to

them for the child's poor progress whilst at home, resonating with previous studies about the moral nature of social work accounting practices which also identify the attribution of responsibility to parents (Hall *et al.*, 1997; Whitaker, 2014; White, 2003). The implicit attribution of responsibility in this extract contrasts with the explicit attributions evident in Extracts 4.2 and 4.5. Both ways of attributing responsibility to parents were present throughout the dataset. By establishing the impact on the child through the contrasting the autistic child's development whilst at home (lines 233-44) with his accomplishments whilst living with foster carers who later adopted him, the care provided by the parents is implicated as problematic. This emphasises the inter-related nature of aspects of the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm. Additionally, the invocation of the better parent (the foster carers) constructs the parents' care as insufficient. The parents' care is problematised through contrasts between the early care that the child received (lines 233-9) and with the care that he is currently receiving from his foster carers which has resulted in him thriving (lines 257-8). Even though the social worker highlights the child's autism as a complicating factor and possible explanation for the child's developmental delay and restricted food preferences (lines 252-3 and 256), by describing the progress the child made with substitute carers, the possible explanation of autism is eclipsed and deficiencies in the parents' care are designated as the casual explanation. Consequently, this implicit evaluation of the care given by the parents positions them as having not fulfilled their responsibilities as parents. Although mental health issues and domestic violence are briefly mentioned (lines 236-7), structural and social factors are not considered as part of the causal explanation⁹. This confirms earlier research by Hall and colleagues (1997) who found that there was a lack of explanation of parents' problems provided in social workers' accounts of their practice.

Through establishing impact on the child and implicating the parents' care, a need for the children to be protected is demonstrated and, as a result, social workers and the organisation are positioned as justified in intervening and removing the children from the family home. This represents a common pattern in the data. The positive

⁹ Whilst poverty is mentioned on a few occasions in the interviews and focus groups, it is discussed as something that social workers come across in their work and is not discussed in relation to issues of responsabilising parents and social justice.

description of the child's progress in his adoptive placement (the child has been adopted by his foster carers) also functions to justify intervention; intervening was the appropriate decision because the child's needs are now being met and he is 'thriving'. By positioning children as in need of protection, and implicitly assigning responsibility to the parents, a professional mandate is to intervene and protect children when these responsibilities are not fulfilled is constructed. This extract has echoes of the 'child rescue' discourse that is evident in current policy approaches in child welfare (see Chapter 1).

Extract 4.2 further confirms the connection between the impact of neglect on the children and the problematisation of parental care and the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm that was identified across the dataset. However, in contrast to the previous extract, different resources are used to establish impact on the children. In this extract, where impact on the children is identified as more difficult to determine, the social worker builds a case that there has been impact on the children. She draws on a relative rather than absolute understanding of impact and brings in the perspectives of other professionals.

Extract 4.2

Interview 5

69 I Okay (.) so erm what was the impact or the potential
70 impact of these concerns on the children
71 SW We love that word at the moment impact on children
72 I yeah
73 SW ((laugh)) erm I suppose it's difficult with this one
74 and this is where we've er where I've (.) erm found
75 it most struggling i- is to identify impact on the
76 children I suppose the the impact is that mum isn't
77 taking care of her health and therefore she isn't
78 able to get the children to school on time and isn't
79 able to get them there a lot of the time given that
80 they've only got sixty percent attendance erm (.)
81 the:: (.) however they achieve well in school which
82 is really difficult but (.) my and my view and other
83 professionals' view in education is that actually
84 they don't achieve their full potential so whilst
85 they might be achieving where they should be in
86 relation to national average and against their peers
87 w- they have potential to be star pupils but because
88 they're not supported the- they're not getting there

The social worker identifies that, in the case described, there has been an impact on the children by constructing a relative approach to appraising the children's progress that takes into account the children's potential. She acknowledges that it has been more challenging to ascertain the impact of the children's poor school attendance (60%) on their academic progress as a developmental deficit because the lack of attendance has not resulted in their progress being behind that of their peers or the national average. On the face of it, the poor school attendance has not impacted on the children's academic performance and 'they achieve well in school' (line 81). However, the social worker puts forward a view that there *has* been an effect on the children's school progress because it is believed that they could be achieving at a much higher level. By discussing the ways that impact is more customarily understood in terms of comparison with peers or the national average (lines 84-6) and then reframing impact for these children as being about achieving their full potential (line 84, lines 87-8), the social worker constructs an alternative, more relative, view of impact. The social worker's reframing of the way that impact can be understood brings to the fore the importance of the children's potential. This is also evident in the repetition of 'potential' twice in the extract (lines 84 and 87). The social worker emphasises the veracity of her claim by stating that it is shared by other professionals (lines 82-3), specifically education professionals who have greater epistemic status given their professional domain (Heritage, 2013). She is therefore emphasising the importance of understanding children's individual developmental needs and that it is unacceptable that these children have not been able to reach their full academic potential even though, on the face of it, 'they achieve well in school' (line 81). This highlights the difficulties of ascertaining impact on children when lack of progress is obscured if a child does not stand out from their peers plus also the need for children to be understood as individuals. The challenges of identifying impact may be more pronounced when child neglect is concerned because it is a heterogeneous concept (Dubowitz *et al.*, 2005) and is significantly shaped by social factors and values (Horwath, 2007) as outlined in the introductory chapter.

Within this description of concerns about the children, the mother's¹⁰ care of the children is problematised through positioning the children as having needs which have not been met in terms of their academic potential (lines 83-86). Again, this problematisation of parental care is a common pattern within the data. However, in contrast to Extract 4.1, responsibility is explicitly attributed to the mother, illustrating the presence of both explicit and implicit or mitigated attribution of responsibility across the dataset. Responsibility is attributed to the mother for the children's poor school attendance and consequently for them not having reached their academic potential, with little attention to the factors that might impact on parenting. There are similarities here with the Working Together definition of child neglect (HM Government, 2018) which explicitly attributes responsibility to parents but does not attend to external influences such as poverty and adversity. The mother is positioned in lines 76-80 as responsible for the children's poor school attendance: 'she isn't able to get the children to school and isn't able to get them there a lot of the time'. Because responsibility is attributed to the mother for the poor school attendance, by implication, she is also identified as responsible for the fact that they have not reached their academic potential. Although there is a mention of the mother's health problems (lines 76-7), this is not explored further as a complicating factor that affects the mother's ability to parent, instead the mother is charged with failing to look after her own health needs. Consequently, with the lack of exploration of the mother's health problems as a complicating factor and the omission of any discussion of other adversities, the mother is responsabilised without attention to social and structural factors which might impact on parenting.

The ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm is evident here because of the explicit discussion about the impact on the children which the social worker believes to be discernible and because of the explicit problematisation of the mother's care. These two aspects of the ideal construct a need for intervention to take place which is not discussed explicitly in this extract but we know from elsewhere in the interview that these children were placed on a child protection plan.

¹⁰ The mother and father were separated and the father was in prison.

The next extract concerns a baby who was in the Special Care Baby Unit immediately after being born and is now being cared for by foster carers because of concerns about the parents' (who having learning disabilities) ability to care for him. The discussion focuses on the current care proceedings and on how to 'test out' the parents' capacity to care for the child in a safe environment (a residential assessment in which parents are monitored 24 hours a day). This extract illustrates how problematic parental behaviour alone is sufficient to index the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm without discussion of risk or the impact on the child. This contrasts with the dominant pattern in the data where discussion of risk or the impact on the child was present alongside and often interwoven with the problematisation of parental care or behaviour.

Extract 4.3

Focus group 2

731 I Going back to the baby in special care erm are there
 732 do parent and child assessment- residential
 733 assessments exist any more or
 734 [have they are they not funded any more
 735 SW [they do erm no they do the problem we had
 736 with this case in particular is and it's not a cost
 737 issue but in this little boy had been moved from
 738 special care baby into a family room so they were in
 739 a family room for a few [days
 740 I [Ri::ght
 741 SW But [lit- could not cope
 742 I [ok
 743 I yep
 744 SW So he'd gone from look- being looked after by the
 745 [special care baby
 746 I [the nurses
 747 SW Then to the family placement then he went to a mother
 748 and baby placement parent and baby placement
 749 I yeah
 750 SW Mum left him after 24 hours and then he went into a
 751 placement on his own now our thing is that we are not
 752 going to move him again until parents show
 753 [commitment to parent
 754 I [yeah
 755 SW and we've had the issue erm with contact so we
 756 offered five days a week contact for two and a half
 757 hours at a time erm they did two sessions of that
 758 contact and then said you know what we're not feeling
 759 great and we're not going to see him until next
 760 Tuesday erm and then said actually we really want to
 761 they're they're very concentrated on the fact that we
 762 have a problem with the house which is in an awful
 763 state but they're determined that that's the reason

764 he's not coming home so they said you know what we'll
 765 only see him once a week because we're quite tired of
 766 looking- we need to look for housing and so we'll
 767 just see him once a week so the we would normally and
 768 residential is where the cause we're now in court
 769 with this
 770 I yeah
 771 SW The court are asking us to look at residential
 772 I yeah
 773 SW But what we're saying is that yes we're happy to do
 774 that but only once the commitment is [shown to parent
 775 ? [yeah

In this extract, through the construction of a contrast between children's services' approach to securing a stable and appropriate place for the baby to live and the parents' lack of commitment, the parents' behaviour is problematised. Consequently, the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm is indexed without explicit discussion of either risk to the baby or impact on the baby. The young age of the baby may implicitly suggest risk, but this is not explicitly articulated or acknowledged. The reasonable behaviour of children's services is specifically emphasised in lines 755-57 where the social worker describes the frequent opportunities that have been offered for the parents to see the baby. This is a relatively high level of contact indicating that a return home to the parents is a possibility at this point. The social worker then explains that the parents, in contrast to the reasonable actions on the part of children's services, only attended two of the offered contact sessions (lines 757-8). The explanation for the parents' lack of attendance at the contact sessions is given as the parents' misplaced focus on the condition of the house, acknowledged by the social worker to be 'in an awful state' (lines 762-3), as the reason the baby is not currently returning home (lines 758-64). The parents are stated as attempting to resolve children's services' 'problem' with the house by looking for new housing and want to see the baby only once a week because they are tired as a result of searching for a new property (lines 760-66). The fact that the parents are attempting to address some of children's services concerns is not acknowledged, nor is the impact of their learning disabilities on their perceptions of the situation. There are similarities here with the contrast between the reasonable behaviour of children's services and the problematic behaviour of the mother highlighted in Extract 4.9.

The parents' behaviour is also problematised at the beginning of the extract when the baby's frequent placement moves are described (lines 737-51). The social worker describes the parents as not being able to cope for a short period of time in a family room in the hospital (lines 738-41) and mum is said to have left the baby after 24 hours in the parent and baby placement (probably a foster care placement which takes parents and their children together). This highlighting of the parents' inability to sustain care of the baby, their lack of attendance at the contact sessions and their prioritisation of their housing issues serves to assign responsibility to the parents for their behaviours which are counter to the expectations of children's services in terms of commitment (lines 751-3, 773-4). Again, the parents' behaviour is contrasted with children's services' reasonable decision to only move the baby and consider a residential placement, as requested by the court, (line 771), once the parents show a 'commitment to parent' (line 754, 772), reinforcing the problematisation of the parents' actions. This problematisation of the parents' behaviour as illustrated in this extract was a common feature within the dataset. It indexes the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm and constructs a need for intervention by children's services which, in this case, has involved keeping the baby in foster care rather than returning him home to his parents.

It was common in the data for the problematisation of parental behaviour to co-exist with some discussion of risk or impact on the child in terms of significant harm. However, in this extract, problematic parental behaviour alone is sufficient to index the ideal, illustrating an exception to this pattern. Without the discussion of risk or impact on the child to contribute to the problematisation of the parents' behaviour (as in Extracts 4.1, 4.2 and 4.5), the social worker uses reported speech to present the parents' actions and views. By using reported speech to distance a speaker from an utterance, the speaker is afforded greater freedom about the content of the utterance (Goffman, 1981). Because the nature of the social worker's description of the parents' actions and views is negative and explicitly evaluative, the use of reported speech increases the neutrality of the social worker and decreases her accountability for the particularly evaluative talk (Clayman, 1992; Potter, 1996). This demonstrates that, in this extract, without discussion of risk or impact on the child, particular discursive devices are required in order to problematise the parents' behaviour in an apparently objective way.

The following two extracts are from the same focus group and occur consecutively. Together, they are illustrative of how the ideal of protection children from (risk of) harm dominated within the data. The extracts involve discussion about how social workers determine when a neglect case is serious enough to require child protection intervention. SW1 and SW2 express two contradictory views. SW1 considers that the extent of parental engagement should be a determining factor, echoing the research evidence that parental cooperation with services has a significant effect on decision such as taking children into care, or initiating child protection investigations (Masson *et al.*, 2008; Platt, 2007). In contrast, SW2 eschews the importance of parental engagement and focuses on risk and significant harm and the role of the parents in this, emphasising the centrality of the threshold of significant harm enshrined in the Children Act 1989. The analysis shows how SW2's view becomes dominant during the interaction. Extract 4.4 is presented here to illustrate the perspective of the first social worker.

Extract 4.4

Focus group 3

968 I We have talked about thresholds a bit already but
 969 I'll ask this question anyway how do you determine
 970 when a neglect situation is severe enough to require
 971 child protection intervention
 972 SW1 For me I think it's it's one it's lack of engagement
 973 but first of it's identifying so you- so- I simplify
 974 it for parents like I said earlier you know if it- if
 975 it's not taking them to medical appointments then
 976 I'll I'll talk about that as- as a health neglect and
 977 then you know there's an educational neglect there's
 978 a basic needs you know erm but if the parents are
 979 working with me and working towards achieving that
 980 then for me I don't necessarily think oh this needs
 981 to go to child protection because they're m- i- it's
 982 [when they're they're not doing as they're supposed
 983 ? [()]
 984 SW1 to or you've got disguised compliance or=
 985 ? =yeah
 986 SW1 you know they're just not opening the door then it
 987 then I think about escalating it but erm I think for
 988 me a benchmark is if- if they are working with me and
 989 they are trying to make that progress then great I
 990 mean if it goes along and clearly they can't then
 991 that's a different issue but I think as long as
 992 they're engaging and they're trying to then (.) it
 993 can be managed on a child in need generally
 994 I °okay°

SW1 emphasises the importance of the parents' efforts to engage with the social worker in making decisions about the necessity of child protection intervention, suggesting that parental engagement is of prime importance or regarded as evidential. She states that if the parents are working well with professionals then she would not immediately view a child neglect situation as needing child protection intervention (lines 978-81) which she reiterates several times during the extract (lines 987-9, lines 991-3). Other contrasting situations such as parents not taking requested actions, disguised compliance, refusing to open the door or lack of progress are listed as situations which *would* more likely require less voluntary child protection intervention (lines 981-6, lines 989-91).

The contrasting view of SW2, presented in Extract 4.5, mobilises the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm by providing specific examples about the impact on children, by identifying risks to children and by problematising the parents' care. SW2 constructs this ideal as taking precedence over recognition that the parents are engaging well with professionals by explicitly rejecting the perspective of the other social worker, presented in Extract 4.4, illustrating the tendency of the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm to be prioritised in the data.

Extract 4.5

Focus group 3

1060 SW2 [...]

1061 I think you know those are the things that sometimes
1062 we don't think about in neglect sometimes we think
1063 about is the house clean is the house dirty you know
1064 have they actually bothered to tidy up today you
1065 know has the washing been done or is the washing not
1066 done you know is the garden organised is it- well
1067 it- d'you know what if the garden's a hazard the
1068 garden's a hazard (.) so either the children can't
1069 go in the garden (.) or if the garden th- if the
1070 children are allowed in the garden and the garden's
1071 a hazard well they're at risk of significant harm
1072 and literally for me it's that it's that
1073 straightforward and I don't get any more complicated
1074 than that around it you know if if a child if a
1075 child is in a situation whereby you know they they
1076 sleep on a a mattress on the floor that stinks to
1077 high heaven and you know results in them being

1078 bullied so badly at school that they start to self-
 1079 harm well that puts them at risk of signif-
 1080 significant harm
 1081 SW1 umm
 1082 SW2 You know and that's for me where I'm at with those
 1083 thresholds and I don't I- I don't for for me it's
 1084 not about the engagement at all [I have to say you
 1085 SW3 [umm
 1086 SW2 know parents Could be m- you know with the best will
 1087 in the world we've got a case at the moment you know
 1088 an- and these parents work really really well with
 1089 us but can they keep the children safe no they
 1090 ca::n't
 1091 SW1 um
 1092 SW2 They really ca:n't because the- g- they can't
 1093 actually a because there's too many of them and b
 1094 because they just can't cope and you know i- so are
 1095 those children at risk of significant harm yes they
 1096 are are mum and dad working with us yes they are
 1097 it's not it's not different you know they-they're
 1098 trying their best but actually at the moment their
 1099 best is not good enough you [know
 1100 SW3 [sometimes
 1101 SW2 And these children are getting injured

In this extract, SW2 specifically identifies risks to children through the identification of hazards and lack of safety of children and these risks are explicitly connected to harm. She does this by discussing how the physical conditions of the home can pose risk to children (lines 1066-74). Letting children access a garden that contains hazards is equated to risk of significant harm. The social worker emphasises the simplicity of the connection between aspects of the physical home environment and risk of significant harm. Towards the end of the extract, SW2 refers to a specific family she is working with at the moment where the parents are unable to keep the children safe (lines 1087-92) and consequently 'these children are getting injured' (line 1101). Again, the lack of safety of the children and the harm to them are explicitly highlighted as connected.

Indexing the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm through identifying impact on children is commonly observed in the social workers' talk across the dataset. In this extract, this is established through the social workers' explicit references to harm but also the social worker provides an example of a sleeping environment that causes a child to smell and results in bullying at school and associated self-harm (lines 1074-80). This impact on the child is similarly regarded

as equating to risk of significant harm. Consequently, through establishing risks to children and impact on them, children are positioned as vulnerable and at risk.

In this extract, representing a common pattern in the data, the parenting described, both in the general discussion at the beginning of the extract and the specific case example towards the end, is problematised. Again, there are similarities with the Working Together definition of child neglect which explicitly responsabilises parents (HM Government, 2018). Through identifying parents' (in)actions or what they are unable to do and connecting these with risks to children through language that evaluates parents' abilities negatively, parenting is constructed as unsatisfactory. For example, at the beginning of the extract, the social worker specifies that children being let into a hazardous garden, a parental behaviour, can result in significant risks to children. Additionally, when the social worker talks about the case that she is working with at the moment she directly attributes responsibility to the parents for the safety of their children and makes statements that explicitly allocate blame to parents when they are viewed as not meeting the safety needs of their children. The best efforts of the parents are evaluated as being 'not good enough' (line 1093) and there is no discussion of the impact that poverty and other adversities might have on parenting. Therefore, parents are explicitly responsabilised in contrast to the language used in Extract 4.1 which only implicitly allocates responsibility, illustrating the nuances of attributing responsibility present in the data. However, in this extract there is also discussion of the positive aspects of the parents' behaviour, which offers a form of blame mitigation, confirming the research literature which shows that in circumstances where families' problems are being described, they can be accompanied by statements that seek to soften accusations or attributions of responsibility (Hall *et al.*, 2006; Stancombe & White, 2005; White, 2003). For example, the parents are stated to 'work really, really well' with children's services (line 1084) and are described as 'trying their best' (lines 1097-8) which suggests that nothing more could be expected of them in terms of effort. However, by problematising parental care and explicitly attributing responsibility to them, even though the force of this blaming is softened, parents are positioned as not fulfilling their responsibilities.

By positioning children as at risk of or suffering harm and parents as responsible for this, a need for action is constructed. This shows explicitly how, in the data, the aspects of the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm are used as resources to construct an imperative for action. Whilst the appropriate action or intervention is not explicitly articulated in this extract, it would be children's services and social workers who would be obligated to take action when likelihood of significant harm is identified within a system in which child protection and the management of risk is the central and legally mandated task.

This extract also illustrates how, in the data, ideals can be constructed as having hierarchical features as they are identified as taking priority over other aspects of the work. In this extract the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm is constructed as taking precedence over recognition of good parental engagement. In lines 1082-4 the social worker reflects on how she personally thinks the threshold for significant harm should be determined. She states that parental engagement should not be taken into account when decisions are made about whether thresholds have been met (lines 1083-4), going on to give the example of the family she is working with where the parents are really well engaged with children's services but nonetheless the children are still experiencing harm (lines 1087-1101). Consequently, the social worker rejects parental engagement as a determining factor in whether a neglect case is serious enough to warrant child protection intervention.

Considering Extracts 4.4 and 4.5 together, the analysis of the diverging views of SW1 and SW2 shows that ideals can be constructed in different ways and are contestable, even within a defined legal framework. In Extract 4.5 SW2 alludes to the contingent nature of the ideals because she predominantly speaks from a personal perspective (lines 1072-4, lines 1082-4), using the phrase 'for me' several times. This indicates recognition that others may not agree with her perspective (she refrains from talking on their behalf) and also that ideals may not always be shared. These two extracts, as part of an exchange on a single topic, are illustrative of a common pattern in the data where the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm dominates. Not only is this ideal given priority by SW2 in Extract 4.5 through the rejection of the importance of parental engagement, but SW1 does not subsequently reaffirm her position or disagree with SW2 before the discussion

moves onto a different topic. Therefore, interactionally, the views of SW2 and the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm, prevail.

Extract 4.6 involves a discussion about court thresholds and how SW1 perceives these to have changed since she was first a social worker (approximately 10 years ago). She identifies the cumulative and ongoing impact on children of neglect, specifically referring to the child's lived experiences, which indexes the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) significant harm. This extract also illustrates the prioritisation of the ideal of protection children from (risk of) harm that was a common feature within the data. The social worker's view that the impact of neglect on children should be recognised as significant and should be acted upon prevails over the approach of the courts who are stated as unwilling to remove children from harmful situations during proceedings.

Extract 4.6

Focus group 3

155 SW1 [...]
156 this point in time because whereas when I first
157 started to practice erm courts were more prepared to
158 [make that decision to remove those children from
159 SW2 [umm
160 SW1 that set of circumstances throughout the proceedings
161 they're no longer willing to do that now so it's
162 almost like the thresholds have- have moved and
163 people talk an awful lot now about well that's a
164 final hearing issue but as a social worker that's not
165 a final hearing issue for the children that I'm
166 working with that's a lived experience for those
167 children now today tomorrow for the next six months
168 sometimes eight months given the court timescales you
169 know >th- i- < they're still going to be living that
170 every single day you know but because people aren't
171 willing to see neglect as imminent risk of
172 [significant harm if a child can physically walk out
173 SW2 [umm umm umm
174 SW1 the door you know (.) that actually for me is is a
175 really dangerous situation that we've got ourselves
176 into erm because it's almost like erm ()
177 something has to happen (.) and when you think
178 [...]

Through the social worker's prioritisation of the child's lived experiences and the identification of the potential for significant harm as a result of ongoing exposure to neglect, impact on the child is referenced which then indexes the ideal of protecting

children from (risk of) harm. Children's lived experiences of neglect are often unexplored, with a tendency to focus on the child's body and external signs of neglect (Scourfield, 2003). The social worker highlights the importance of the child's lived experiences of neglect (lines 166-7) and how these problematic lived experiences can endure for long periods of time during the court proceedings (lines 167-8) when courts do not make the decision to remove children (lines 161). This is a situation that, in this social worker's view, did not happen historically (lines 156-62). The social worker emphasises the perspective of the child in her descriptions of the enduring daily experiences of neglect for the child: 'that's a lived experience for those children now today tomorrow and for the next six months sometimes eight months' (lines 166-8). In lines 170-74 she talks about risk of significant harm and how there is a view that the often cumulative effects of neglect are not considered as placing the child at imminent risk of significant harm (Ayre, 1998; Tanner & Turney, 2003). There is now a body of research that demonstrates that, when compared with other forms of maltreatment, child neglect is responded to less frequently and less intensively (Buckley, 2003; Farmer & Lutman, 2012; Gibbons *et al.*, 1995; Thoburn *et al.*, 2000; Wilding & Thoburn, 1997) despite being the most commonly recorded type of child maltreatment (Department for Education, 2019). Specifically relevant to the discussion in this extract, there is also research evidence that suggests that cumulative concerns about child neglect are insufficient for court intervention, rather a specific incident is needed to prompt action in cases of neglect (Dickens, 2007). The social worker alludes to this towards the end of the extract when she says: 'something has to happen' (line 177) meaning that an incident would compel a court to take action.

This extract represents a common pattern in the data: the dominance of the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm. In this extract, the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm prevails as a result of the contrast between the perspective of the social worker and the problematic stated position of the courts. The social worker puts forward her own view that the impact of neglect on children should be recognised as significant and should be acted upon rather than delaying such decisions until the final hearing: 'as a social worker that's not a final hearing issue' (lines 164-5). In contrast, through the descriptions of the child's daily lived experiences ('they're still going to be living that every single day', lines 169-70), the

approach of the courts is identified as problematic because they are stated to be no longer willing to remove children from harmful situations during the proceedings (line 161). The social worker describes the current situation as 'dangerous' (line 175), although this is attributed to a collective influence ('we've got ourselves into') instead of responsibility being directly attributed to the courts (lines 175-6).

In my data, impact on the child, risks to children and problematic parental care are central to the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm. In extract 4.7, the significance of these aspects to the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm is further substantiated because their absence is made relevant in the discussion of a decision that was made that a child no longer needed to be the subject of a child protection plan. Consequently, the absence of these aspects of this ideal results in the absence of the need for intervention or action.

Extract 4.7

Interview 7

174 CH Even if she had done that and I don't believe she
175 had done [it I have to say that knowing her (.) I
176 I [um
177 CH don't think she had done it but we did delist it
178 cause the little baby was thriving (.) she was (.)
179 besotted by him she was doing everything that she
180 needed to do (.) erm (.) and we clearly had to go
181 and investigate
182 I umm
183 CH how this could (.) happen (.) erm but that was a (.)
184 and I think we all concurred that that was a good
185 decision (1.0) because we looked at (.) the risk
186 which is what you have to do in confe[rence and I
187 I [yeah
188 CH feelings and all those (.) unquantifiable know we
189 look at lots of things As well and have things but
190 this child was safe
191 I yes
192 CH And that was the bottom line
193 I Yeah yeah
194 CH And that's a good conference and and she thanked us
195 all and she said I swear that wasn't me
196 I Umm=
197 CH =And I said well you know it will become apparent
198 [who it is (.) but right now the child's safe and
199 I [yeah
200 CH you're looking after him well (.) and you've got h-
201 a home that's clean
202 I umm
203 CH All the rest of it and you have a support network

204 not a huge one but you've got a support network (.)
205 and on that basis it shouldn't continue (.) erm but
206 [...]

Identifying the absence of impact on the child, risks to children and problematic parental care constructs the lack of a need for action to protect the child and consequently the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm is made relevant. The absence of impact on the baby discussed in this extract is established through the social worker's positive evaluation of how well the baby was doing: 'the little baby was thriving' (line 178). A lack of risk to the baby is explicit in the chair's repeated confirmations that the child was safe (lines 190 & 198). The social worker's description of the care provided by the mother establishes that it was not problematic, instead it was evaluated positively in several ways. The mother was said to be 'besotted' by the child (line 179), doing everything that she was supposed to be doing (lines 179-80), looking after the child well (line 200), maintaining good standards of cleanliness in the home (lines 200-1) and receiving support from a small network (lines 203-4).

The absence of impact on the child, risks to children and problematic parental care cohere to establish the absence of a need for action or intervention and this connection is explicitly articulated. The chair states that decision was made that the child no longer needed to be the subject of a child protection plan ('we did delist it' line 177). She repeats the nature of the decision again towards the end of the extract (line 205) but specifically states that the decision was made on the basis of the positive evaluations of the situation that she has given.

To conclude this section, I have presented extracts which illustrate how, within the dataset, the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm is indexed through the construction of the impact of neglect on the child, the problematisation of parents' care or behaviour (with minimal recognition of pressures on parents such as poverty and other social and structural factors) and implicit or explicit attribution of responsibility to them, and identification of risks to children. The other common pattern that is illustrated by the extracts is that the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm is frequently given priority within the dataset. This occurs when other ideals or perspectives are explicitly rejected in favour of the ideal of protecting

children from (risk of) harm (see Extracts 4.4 & 4.5). The analysis has also revealed the conceptualisations regarding the rights, roles and responsibilities of children, parents, families that are embodied in this ideal. Children are positioned as vulnerable and at risk, with parents positioned as posing a risk to them, even sometimes when they are co-operating. Consequently, the state is positioned as needing to intervene to protect children.

Keeping children within their families

Whilst children require protection from harm in certain circumstances, there is also the recognition that children are ‘best looked after within their families’ (HM Government, 2018, pg. 8) (see also Children Act 1989). Keeping children within their families is seen to enable their needs to be met in terms of identity, belonging and attachment and also recognises that harm can result from removing children from their birth families and broader family networks (Lonne *et al.*, 2009). The 1989 Children Act’s focus on family support is seen to be a key way that children can be kept within their families. This significant emphasis on the supportive role of local authorities in relation to families is complemented by a partnership approach to working with parents and children whose involvement in information sharing and decision-making is promoted. Indeed, when children do end up being looked after by the local authority, the most common outcome of being in care is an eventual return home¹¹. Whilst a period of temporary accommodation for a child (under section 20, Children Act 1989) may enable a family to cope (Featherstone *et al.*, 2014b), research demonstrates that, sadly, returns home from care often break down or children have poor outcomes in those that continue because they are more likely to experience further maltreatment and have poorer well-being (Biehal, 2006; Biehal *et al.*, 2015; Farmer & Lutman, 2012). Even when children cannot remain at home, placement within the extended family (kinship care) should be prioritised (Department for Education, 2010). Within the ideal of family preservation, institutions and social workers are positioned as performing an extensive supportive

¹¹ 30% of children in England who ceased to be looked after in the year ending 31 March 2019 were returned home (Department for Education, 2020.).

role and families are understood as relational and as a significant resource in which children are embedded (Featherstone *et al.*, 2014b; Fox Harding, 1991b).

In the data, keeping children within their families (whether that is with parents or within the extended family) is identified as important and as best for children. This ideal was also identified in Keddell's (2013) study of a large NGO provider of child protection services in New Zealand where it was termed a discourse of family maintenance. In my study, through talk about offering parents support and opportunities to make changes and timely intervention to prevent problems escalating further, the ideal of keeping children within their families is mobilised. Consequently, the facilitative role of social workers and the local authority in enabling children to remain at home or within their kinship network was commonly emphasised in the data. The ideal of keeping children within their families is related to the ideal of protecting children from harm because there can be tensions between the two in situations where keeping children within their family network is not in the child's best interests because of the risk of harm to them and the risks of remaining have to be balanced against the recognised risks of removal. In attending to how these kinds of tensions are managed interactionally, the analysis demonstrates how the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm is used to justify exceptions to the ideal of keeping children within their families. The extracts presented in this section are illustrative of these patterns that were identified.

In one focus group the importance of the ideal of keeping children within their families was expressed explicitly and succinctly by one of the participants:

Extract 4.8

Focus group 3

1182 SW1 Erm and we know that the findings are for children
1183 to remain at home with their families is the right
1184 way and the proper way to do that

Here, the social worker emphasises the moral imperative to keep children in their families through the use of 'the right way' and 'the proper way'. The importance of the birth family to children is underlined.

Descriptions of support offered to families often functioned to mobilise the ideal of keeping children within their families because support can enable children to remain at home, and Extract 4.9 provides an example of this pattern that was identified in the data. This extract also illustrates the ordering of ideals because exceptions to the ideal of keeping children in the family are legitimised by the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm.

Extract 4.9

Interview 6

87 I Okay (.) erm (.) and how did (.) erm (.) did mum
88 view the situation
89 SW Erm (2.0) her (.) attitude towards the process I
90 think changed erm (.) in it reached a point where
91 it just became beyond her control I think and she
92 basically just completely buried her head in the
93 sand so just refused to erm engage with anybody she
94 had a wealth of support and again cause she was a
95 young mum she probably in all fairness was given
96 more opportunity than maybe we- you know she was
97 given a little bit more you know additional support
98 and extra time because of her age erm but she just
99 didn't engage with any of it so erm it was just a
100 case of like (.) sometimes she'd say yeah I know I
101 know I'm not doing what I should do like I need to
102 do there but putting it into action she just
103 couldn't do basically erm so yeah

From information provided earlier in the interview we know that this is a case where the children were eventually removed from the mother's care. In this extract, through contrastive work, the approach of children's services is juxtaposed against the response of the mother to the offered support. Consequently, the ideal of keeping children within their families is mobilised. Children's services are positioned as making every effort to support the family and making it possible for the children to remain at home with the mother through the provision of support. The social worker states that the mother was offered a large amount of support and extra time to make changes (lines 93-4, lines 96-8). The mother's young age is given as a reason for the amount of support provided and the extra time given (lines 94-8). In contrast, the mother's behaviour is problematised; she is depicted as failing to engage with the support offered (without any reflection by the social worker on the nature and appropriateness of the support) and as culpable for the situation. The mother is described as being overwhelmed with the situation becoming 'beyond her control'

(line 91), resulting in her refusal to engage with the support (lines 90-3).

Furthermore, the social worker describes her as being aware of what she needed to do but unable to take action (lines 99-103), adding to the depiction of the mother as wholly responsible for the eventual removal of the children into care, with children's services being absolved of responsibility. As identified earlier, the problematisation of parental care or behaviour was a common occurrence in the data. The way that the mother's behaviour is problematised and she is responsibilised in this extract shares similarities with how parents are positioned within the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm.

Given that the children were removed from the family and placed in foster care, this extract also illustrates how the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm can function to legitimise exceptions to the ideal of keeping children in their families because the children were not being protected from harm despite extensive support being provided to the mother. This demonstrates an ordering of ideals, which was a common pattern within the data. The ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm dominates because it can be used to account for exceptions to other ideals as evident in this extract.

In Extract 4.10, the ideal of keeping children in their families is also explicitly articulated. It is indexed through the social worker's focus on timely intervention to enable children to remain within their kinship network which is contrasted with how a lack of timely intervention can put this possibility at risk. This extract is illustrative of a pattern within the data in which kinship care is identified as the next best option if children cannot remain with their birth parents.

Extract 4.10

Focus group 3

1186 SW1 And are we equipped with the right support the right
1187 services and the right resources for families for
1188 this to happen and I- I'm with you SW2 if if enough
1189 is enough we need to intervene and we need to
1190 intervene quicker in neglect cases and I think that
1191 is the challenge
1191 SW2 And I think for me: that's really important because
1192 actually the- the quicker we intervene the more
1193 likely we are to keep children within their family
1194 because what happens is if we allow things to go

1195 round and round and round and round for years and
1196 years and years sadly children's behaviours escalate
1197 and then we get to a stage where other family
1198 members you know who c- who could have cared for
1199 these children who would have happily cared for
1200 these children can no longer do that and for me
1201 that's part of identifying that risk because the
1202 sooner we do it and the we sooner we can actually
1203 get everybody in a- in a in a safe place the more
1204 likely we are to keep those children within their
1205 family and for me that's always gotta be the goal
1206 every single time

In the context of a discussion about the need for earlier intervention in child neglect cases, SW2 contrasts the possibility of keeping children within their wider family network through timely intervention with situations where timely intervention does not occur which jeopardises children's chances to remain in their kinship network. This emphasis on the need for timely intervention mobilises the ideal of keeping children within their families. SW2 asserts that if intervention is not timely and situations are allowed to deteriorate then children's behaviours can become difficult, preventing them being cared for by family members who would have been willing to take the children if things had not escalated (lines 1194-1200). Thus, acting later is problematised in contrast to intervening sooner which is depicted as positive because of the increased likelihood of keeping children within their wider family network (lines 1201-5). This relates to the ideal of intervention that is appropriate and necessary which will be discussed later. As in Extract 4.9, the role of children's services in working with families to keep children at home is emphasised, positioning them as responsible for pursuing the ideal of keeping children within their families. Responsibility for ensuring intervention is timely is assigned to the institution and the profession through SW1's repeated references to 'we' connected to a type of action. For example, SW1 states: 'the quicker we intervene' (line 1192) and 'if we allow things to go round and round' (lines 1194-5).

SW2 also explicitly expresses that kinship care should be the first option for children that cannot live with their birth parents, representing a common pattern in the data and mobilising the ideal of keeping children within their families. She articulates that this ideal is an absolute priority: 'the more likely we are to keep those children within their family and for me that's always gotta be the goal every single time'

(lines 1203-6). Because the social worker talks about caring for children within the wider family network rather than keeping them with their birth families, this appears to be an acceptable compromise between protecting children from harm and keeping them within their families.

Working ‘with’, not doing ‘to’: Working in partnership with families

This ideal concerns the way that social workers and institutions work with families. It is related to features of other ideals such as the family support aspect of keeping families together. Working in partnership with families involves recognising the diverse social and individual factors that impact on parenting, including them in decision-making, developing a collaborative relationship and supporting them to make changes, resonating with a strong commitment in social work to anti oppressive practice (Dalrymple & Burke, 2006). The social work values of empowering people, participatory practice and strengths-based approaches are relevant here. The empowering aspect of partnership working is particularly important as often service users will have had (sometimes extensive) experiences of being disempowered both generally and in relation to their contact with social work services (Thompson, 2016). Working in partnership with parents is the best way to help children, but when compulsory intervention is needed because of child protection concerns research on families’ experiences (Bell, 1999; Birmingham City Council, 2014; Buckley *et al.*, 2011; Corby *et al.*, 1996; Dale, 2004; Ghaffar *et al.*, 2011; Jackson *et al.*, 2016; Muench *et al.*, 2017; Smithson & Gibson, 2017) suggests that this facet of practice can become lost within a system so narrowly focused on the assessment of risk to children from parents and families (Bell, 1999) (see also Chapter 2 and the analysis of the child protection conference data in the next chapter).

Working in partnership with families is commonly identified as a desired aim for work with families in the interview and focus group data. This section presents extracts which are representative of a pattern in the data in which openness and honesty, working alongside families and empowering families as preferred ways of working mobilise the ideal of working in partnership with families. These aspects of the ideal of working in partnership with families are evident in the dataset when

behaviours or approaches that are beneficial to the working relationship between parents and social workers are discussed.

In the first extract in this section, the social worker's emphasis on the importance of being open and honest with parents indexes the ideal of working in partnership with families.

Extract 4.11

Interview 3

507 I So talking about kind of at the conference and
508 preparation for the conference erm how do you talk to
509 parents about concerns about neglect
510 SW E:rm: when with me I (.) I just h- I'm honest with
511 them
512 I yeah
513 SW I have to say this is what we're worried about this
514 is why we're going to conference you can say it is
515 like sort of a signs of safety but erm it is good
516 actually if you do write it down like that
517 [table with them
518 I [okay (.) uhuh
519 SW So they can visually see which which is like ()
520 well how they do it in conference now so with the one
521 I was telling you about the mental health
522 I yeah
523 SW That's like she (.) when you looked into it the
524 reason she didn't go to take him for his
525 immunisations is because she was going through this
526 mental health crisis but also she f- (.) which the
527 mental health crisis would have impacted her thinking
528 because she she had got it into her head that you
529 know all this erm (.) er er information that you see
530 on facebook how immunisations can harm children so
531 that was playing on her mind but she wouldn't talk
532 about it and then I said I said that to her and she
533 said but th- this is why so now I can under- okay now
534 I can understand that it's not cause you can't be
535 bothered [to do it
536 I [yeah
537 SW Cause that's what professionals will [think if you
538 I [yeah yeah yeah
539 SW can't she's she's prioritising her own needs over her
540 children's that's what professionals are gonna think
541 I yeah
542 SW So usually if we have that conversation and she knows
543 we're gonna go [and then usually touch wood three
544 I [yeah
545 SW days I try and go out and go through the conference

546 [report so
547 I [yeah yeah
548 SW when we're in there she's getting no shocks from me
549 I Yes yeah

The social worker's focus on openness and honesty mobilises the ideal of working in partnership with families because openness and honesty, which are core social work values, are positioned as having benefits for effective working relationships with families. This extract is thus illustrative of a common pattern in the data. The positives of openness and honesty are demonstrated in two ways in this extract. The social worker emphasises the benefits to parents of being open and honest and the benefits of exploring different perspectives in relation to concerns to gain a greater understanding of how concerns are viewed. In talking about her approach to talking to parents about concerns about neglect in preparation for a child protection conference, the social worker emphasises that she is honest with parents and explains what professionals are worried about and the reasons for the conference (lines 510-4). The social worker demonstrates recognition of the benefit to the parents of being honest through her comments about going through the social work report for conference prior to the conference so that in the conference the parents are not shocked or surprised at what is discussed (lines 542-48).

The second way that the benefits of openness and honesty are demonstrated in this extract is through the case example given by the social worker. This example emphasises the importance of exploring the perspectives of different parties so that a greater understanding of the complexity of concerns can be gained. The mother and professionals are described as having different perspectives about the reasons for the child not being fully immunised. The mother had seen information on Facebook which had caused her to believe that immunisations can harm children (lines 528-30). Professionals do not know this and the social worker says that they will think that the mother 'can't be bothered to do it' (lines 534-5) and is not prioritising the children's needs (lines 537-40). She also points out that, having had a discussion with the mother, she now has a better understanding of why the mother did not take the child to be immunised. Through her discussion of these different perspectives, the social worker highlights that people can have significantly different perspectives on the same thing. The social worker's description of this case emphasises the

importance of exploring the different perspectives that parents and professionals have so that each has a fuller view of the other's perspective. This description of the social worker's exploration with the mother of the differing perspectives on the same situation illustrates that relationships between families and professionals that involve openness and honesty can potentially result in a greater understanding of families' lives.

In Extract 4.12, the ideal of working in partnership with families is indexed through this social worker's talk about a desired way of working alongside families.

Extract 4.12

Interview 2

983 SW Er and we've gotta get social workers into that that
984 mode of er as well as partner agencies to to working
985 alongside families with families and and going back to
986 the old kind of style of of of if you're involved with
987 somebody involve them with your involvement
988 I umm
989 SW Otherwise you're just it it's just doing us and them
990 all the time and signs of safety is supposed to have
991 [() a method and an approach that allows erm
992 I [yes
993 SW families to say okay I'm involved in this I'm
994 involving these people in my family as well
995 I uhuh
996 SW Because actually as we know all children on child
997 protection plans live at home with people who we're
998 saying are abusing them
999 I °yeah°
1000 SW And we () from time to time somebody visits them
1001 does something=
1002 I =yeah
1003 SW We've got to get to a point where where we've got to
1004 give confidence back to families that they're able to
1005 make those changes=
1006 I =yeah
1007 SW And they'll they'll be helped to do so
1008 I Yeah yeah yeah
1009 SW Rather than you're a bad person I'm really worried
1010 about this er and you haven't done anything about it
1011 I Yeah yeah

In this extract, the social worker describes two approaches to working with families and through contrast work the differing importance attached to each of these approaches is revealed. Consequently, the desirability and benefits of an approach in which professionals work alongside families to help them achieve change is

emphasised. This description of the desired approach mobilises the ideal of working in partnership with families because working alongside families is emphasised, representing a typical pattern in the data. The social worker explicitly focuses on the need to work alongside parents (lines 984-5) and positions parents as the drivers and catalysts of change. Professionals are positioned in a supportive and facilitative role. This emphasis on relationships with parents and positioning them as an important resource shares similarities with previous research by Keddell (2013; 2015). This study found that constructing subject positions for parents that avoided attributing responsibility to them functioned to maximise the possibility of collaborative relationships between the family and social workers (Keddell, 2013; Keddell, 2015).

However, this way of working is not presented as a description of current practice. It is described as something that is aspirational and that the local authority is working towards this aim ('we've gotta get social workers in that mode' (lines 983-4), 'we've got to get to a point' (line 1003)). The social worker contrasts this desired way of working with an alternative approach in which parents and parenting are identified as the problem and social workers are cast in an authoritative role. This undesirable approach is illustrated through the social worker's comments about polarity between professionals and parents, or 'us and them' (line 989), and through the contrast between a supportive approach and an approach which parents are pathologised and held accountable for taking action to resolve problems (lines 1009-10). The contrast work performed by the social worker in this extract is representative of the contrast between paternalism and partnership. Paternalism is an approach which prioritises state intervention to protect children, employing the state's perspective on what is harmful (Calder, 1995). On the other hand, partnership shifts the balance of power to families who are fully informed, fully involved in decision-making and who work collaboratively with services (Calder, 1995). These two approaches highlight the differences between 'working with' and 'doing to'.

Whilst in this extract, a partnership approach to working with parents is indicated as preferential to an approach in which parents and parenting are problematised and the state intervenes in an authoritative way, overall within the data the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm, which embodies many elements of the latter approach, dominates.

In the last extract in this section the social worker provides a case example which illustrates another important aspect of partnership working: empowering families.

Extract 4.13

Interview 4

251 I Yeah okay (.) erm and working with that family what
252 were you particularly pleased with erm in terms of
253 your work with them
254 SW I think just the way that they (.) their confidence
255 [grew that was the big thing because they went from
256 I [yeah
257 SW texting me practically every day asking me if this
258 was okay or should they do that and they would text
259 me things like erm the curtain's broken should I
260 change the curtains or is it okay to not have
261 curtains (.)things like that [really low
262 I [yeah
263 SW Level and you'd have to talk them through it and I
264 started like I started off sort of telling them yes
265 this is what you do and then I went to what do you
266 think you should [do and then we got to the point
267 I [yeah
268 SW where they were just texting me saying just to let
269 you know this happened and this is what I've done to
270 where I'd then go brilliant well done and then they
271 stopped texting me so to me that was massive that
272 sort of journey so that's the thing that I'm most
273 pleased [about
274 I [yeah yeah
275 SW The confidence

The social worker's description of her role in empowering the parents to take control of the family's situation and effect improvements mobilises the ideal of working in partnership with families and this ideal is depicted as a desired aim for work with families. This indexing of the ideal of working in partnership with families through talk about empowering families which is evident in this extract is representative of a common pattern across the dataset. In this extract, in order to illustrate the significant improvement in the parents' confidence during child protection involvement¹², the social worker compares the parents' initial dependence on the social worker with their subsequent increased confidence. The social worker describes how, at first, the parents relied on the social worker to provide input into situations that needed resolving such as domestic issues. This resulted in the social worker receiving

¹² Both of the parents have learning difficulties.

frequent text messages from the parents asking questions (lines 255-63). This is contrasted with the point at which work with the family ceased when the parents had stopped messaging the social worker because they were confident enough to make the decisions on their own (lines 270-1). Thus, the parents are positioned as competent and capable of safe parenting, in contrast to the prevailing way that they are problematised within the dataset and particularly in relation to the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm. The social worker describes how this change happened through her work with the parents where she would initially tell the parents what they should do, then she would ask them what they thought and lastly she gave them positive reinforcement when they had the confidence to make a decision without asking the social worker first (lines 263-70). Of significance is the way that the social worker positions herself as working in partnership with the parents in an enabling and supportive way to contribute to their empowerment, emphasising the supportive role of professionals in empowering service users.

Intervention is appropriate and necessary

The last ideal in this chapter relates to the necessity and appropriateness of intervention in family lives. This perspective favours family autonomy and is reflected in the non-intervention principle of the Children Act 1989. The family is regarded as primarily a private domain and state intervention only takes place in certain circumstances (Fox Harding, 1991a) such as when a child is at risk of harm. Therefore, there is a connection between this ideal and the ideal of protection from (risk of) harm. Not only must intervention be necessary but it also must be appropriate to the needs of the family whilst being least intrusive. It must be at the right level, for the appropriate amount of time and based on the child's needs. If intervention is not pertinent to the needs of the family, families who are in dire need of support can be left to cope without it or intervention can be oppressive if it is unnecessary or if a lower level or different type of support would be more suitable for the family.

This section considers extracts in which social workers discuss how interventions should be specific and tailored to the needs of the child and the family. These extracts are representative of a common pattern in the data in which the ideal of

intervention which is appropriate and necessary is indexed through discussion of the age of the child, the level of intervention and the length of time the involvement lasts for. These aspects of this ideal were evident in the data when social workers emphasised the desirability of appropriate and necessary intervention and also the negatives of intervention that is inappropriate or unnecessary. The extracts in this section also illustrate the prevailing pattern identified in the data whereby the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm dominates because of its use as a legitimating device for the ideal of intervention that is appropriate and necessary.

Extract 4.14 illustrates how the age of the child mobilises the ideal of intervention that is appropriate and necessary.

Extract 4.14

Focus group 2

130 SW1 I don't know in terms of child protection though and
 131 this is erm a query erm () really but I don't
 132 know whether we would necessarily look at placing a
 133 fourteen year old on a child protection plan purely
 134 for neglect as quickly as we would with a two three
 135 year old
 136 SW2 no because [like you said ()
 137 SW1 [and but their needs are being met they
 138 are still experiencing neglect but I think our
 139 response is different to older children
 140 SW3 and sometimes you have to balance that up with again
 141 make- that that child's potentially been there for
 142 fourteen years
 143 SW1 umm
 144 SW3 and we haven't come up to it- they haven't been
 145 known to us and children become resilient erm and
 146 are able [to meet their basic care [needs
 147 SW2 [yeah [you have to
 148 balance their thing of
 149 ? yeah
 150 SW2 what's better if the parent is working with us
 151 what's better is to probably keep it on a child in
 152 need make sure that the child stays at home and try
 153 and improve that rather than=
 154 ? =ummm=
 155 SW2 =jumping in to a CP potentially court and removing a
 156 fourteen year old that doesn't know any different
 157 (.) so I think it it is different
 158 SW3 yeah I think you're right
 159 ? definitely

In this extract, the most appropriate response to concerns about neglect in relation to an older child is established as different from the response in relation to a younger child. This is initially a tentative suggestion which becomes confirmed and agreed during the interaction as the three social workers contribute different aspects of the argument. A notable pattern in my data was the indexing of the ideal of intervention being appropriate and necessary through the discussion of differentiated responses to neglect according to the child's age, echoing research that suggests that age is an important factor in deciding how to respond to child protection concerns (Gorin & Jobe, 2013). In this extract, which is illustrative of this pattern, the social workers argue that the type of intervention should be appropriate to the needs of the child which would be dependent on their age¹³. This argument is evident in SW1's proposition that the response to concerns about neglect might be different for a toddler compared to a teenager (lines 130-5). She posits that children's services would not place a 14-year old on a child protection plan as quickly as a much younger child (lines 131-5). SW1 states that older children still experience neglect (Raws, 2016; Rees *et al.*, 2011) but that the response to neglect can be different for this group of children. Indeed, there is research that suggests that the child protection system is not the most effective way to meet the needs of adolescents (Gorin & Jobe, 2013; Rees *et al.*, 2010). SW3 then adds an explanation for why the response to older children might be different. She suggests that adolescents are more able to meet their own basic care needs and to have developed resilience (lines 145-6), although research suggests that this is a mistaken view (Rees *et al.*, 2010).

The specific needs of older children are mobilised to further emphasise that responses to concerns about neglect should be qualitatively different according to age. An interventionist approach involving child protection and potential removal of the child is positioned as undesirable. This is accomplished by invoking the child's needs in relation to remaining in their family if that is all that they have known. SW2 proposes that it is probably better to remain at the level of child in need for older children (but only if the parents are working with children's services, see Extracts 4.4 and 4.5) and try to improve the situation at home (lines 150-56). This is

¹³ There was discussion at other points in the focus group about the importance of taking into account the child's stage of development in assessing the child's needs and the need for intervention.

contrasted with the alternative of going to child protection and possibly removal of the child and the involvement of the courts (lines 154-6). SW2 constructs this option as undesirable by implying that there will be a negative impact on an older child who 'doesn't know any different' because they have always been at home (lines 155-6). Here the link with the ideal of keeping children in their families is clear.

The next extract is illustrative of the connection, evident in the wider dataset, between the need for intervention to be at the right level and the ideal of intervention needing to be appropriate and necessary. In this context, the need for intervention to be at the right level means that it should be commensurate with the extent of need and possible risk of harm. This extract also demonstrates how the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm is used as a legitimating device for the ideal of intervention that is appropriate and necessary.

Extract 4.15

Interview 4

732 I Okay erm (.) so you said erm (.) you find it have
733 found it m- more difficult to get a child off a plan
734 erm (.) have you got any examples of erm where you
735 were wanting the child to be off a plan and (.)
736 conference (.) perhaps were having a different
737 opinion
738 SW Yeah (.) er quite a few erm I think it tends to come
739 from the other professionals being nervous (.) that
740 they're going to be the ones left holding holding
741 the baby as it were because they sort of saying well
742 you'll get them off a plan and then you're just
743 gonna disappear and we're gonna be the ones left and
744 they don't want that responsibility and they're
745 quite scared of it so what I find is they will often
746 say well yes things have changed but we need a
747 period of monitoring and it's like we can't use
748 child protection as the monitoring device that's not
749 what it's about it's oppressive you know it's quite
750 serious child protection and you need to understand
751 that and they'll say yeah but couldn't we just ()
752 another six months just in case () like no and
753 you used to hear that word just in case all the time
754 I ()
755 SW and it would always be you know yes they have made
756 the changes but look at the history and I'd be like
757 yes I know but we're looking at now the here and now
758 this child is not at risk of suffering significant
759 harm they can't be on a plan you need to end it and
760 they'd be oh yes but (.)what if and it's [like well
761 I [umm

762 SW if that happens then we'll escalate it again

The social worker contrasts the cautious views of other professionals when it comes to decisions about whether a child should remain on a child protection plan with her own view that continuing a child protection plan when it is not needed is oppressive. This contrast work indexes the need for intervention to be at the right level and consequently the ideal of intervention being appropriate and necessary. Other professionals are positioned as having a preference for continuing a child protection plan 'just in case' (lines 751-2) or as a monitoring device. The social worker states that other professionals can be anxious about taking responsibility for monitoring the situation once children's services are no longer involved (lines 739-45). This is identified as a reason for professionals wanting to continue child protection plans as a precaution. She also states that other professionals can reference this history of the case to argue that a child protection plan needs to continue (line 756). In contrast, the social worker references the need for intervention to be proportionate, drawing on the perspective of the service user to highlight the negatives of unnecessary child protection plans and the concept of significant harm to emphasise its importance in decision making. The social worker states that her contrasting view is that continuing child protection plans when they are no longer needed is oppressive (line 749). She is clear that 'we can't use child protection as a monitoring device' because that is not what it is intended for (lines 747-8). Furthermore, to support her view, the social worker draws on the concept of significant harm. She states that if the child is no longer at risk of suffering significant harm currently, then a child protection plan is not needed (lines 758-9), a threshold which is outlined in the Children Act 1989.

This extract also demonstrates how the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm is used as a legitimating device for the ideal of intervention that is appropriate and necessary, illustrating the dominance of the ideal of protection children from (risk of) harm which was a common pattern in the data. The social worker's reference to significant harm connects the ideal of intervention that is appropriate and necessary with the ideal of protection children from (risk of) harm, invoking the legal framework. Here the ideal of protection children from (risk of) harm is used as a resource to construct the legitimacy of the ideal of intervention that is appropriate and necessary. Intervening at the level of child protection (i.e. keeping a child on a

child protection plan) rather than at a lower level such as child in need is stated as only appropriate and necessary if the child is at risk of significant harm.

The final extract in this chapter is representative of a pattern in the data in which talk about the length of time of the intervention indexed the ideal of intervention that is appropriate and necessary. In this extract the social worker is arguing for the need to spend extended periods of time (two years in this example) working with some families so that changes are made and sustained which mobilises the ideal of intervention that is appropriate and necessary.

Extract 4.16

Focus group 3

619 SW1 [...]
620 I think sometimes people also need to acknowledge
621 that sometimes when you start to make good progress
622 you actually need some time some quite serious time
623 and you know sometimes that time goes on a little bit
624 longer every time there's another baby arrives you
625 know because then you're kinda dealing with another
626 issue on top of the last one and the last one bu:t
627 you know sometimes that time is time well spent so
628 we've got a case that we've been involved with for-
629 for two years erm with a with a family who you know
630 used to live by a river under a tree so think that
631 erm you know a horri- a horrible house here is
632 actually like Buckingham palace to them you know so
633 we've had some cultural cultural conversations I
634 think it's fair to say but you know those children
635 are now in a su- in suitable accommodation parents
636 now know what's acceptable in the UK they're now a-
637 they're now understanding why these things are
638 important for their children you know some of these
639 children were failure to thrive you know i- i- this
640 w- got very very serious but that time that we've
641 spent has enabled those children to stay together
642 with their parents now you know is somebody gonna
643 always gonna have to keep a bit of an eye and help
644 them out with bits and pieces yeah probably bu:t (.)
645 those children are still there and they're still
646 living with their family and they're still erm
647 getting all their cultural needs met but they're also
648 getting their basic care needs met as well an- and
649 that piece of work long two years way above and what
650 anybody's happy with us to do actually for me was
651 time well spent and I think that's the other thing
652 that we have with neglect is sometimes people have
653 got to realise that we- we need [to spend a bit more
654 time with it

The need for the length of the intervention to be appropriate to the needs of the family is emphasised in this extract through highlighting the benefits of this particular way of working to children. This mobilises the ideal of intervention being appropriate and necessary. The social worker argues that sometimes children's services need to work with families for extended periods of time to effect change (see also Thoburn & Making Research Count Consortium, 2009). This is a view which challenges ideas about the need to act decisively within a child's 'timeframe' for fear of missing a crucial window for improving outcomes (Brown & Ward, 2012) informed by recent neuroscientific arguments about irreversible damage to children's brains from poor early experiences. The social worker illustrates her perspective with an example beginning in line 628 about a specific family that the social worker was involved with. Through contrasting the previous circumstances of the family with the most recent situation, the social worker emphasises the changes that have taken place and consequently the benefits of working for lengthy periods of time with families. The previous circumstances of the family who 'used to live by a river under a tree' (line 630) and where some of children were failing to thrive (lines 638-9) are described. These circumstances are contrasted with the most recent situation where the family are living 'in suitable accommodation' (lines 634-5), the parents 'know what's acceptable in the UK' (lines 635-6), the parents understand why children's needs should be met (lines 637-8) and the children have remained with their birth parents and are having their basic and cultural needs met (lines 645-8). Here, a connection is made with the ideal of protecting children from (risk) of harm because working with the family for a longer period of time has resulted in their basic and cultural needs being met. There is also a link with the ideal of keeping families together because the children remaining at home is held up as a desired aim of intervening for an extended period of time (see also Extract 4.14).

The contrast work undertaken in the case description in this extract illustrates the significant changes that have taken place during the period of time children's services have been involved with the family. The social worker contends that the turnaround of the family was accomplished because of the substantial period of time (two years) that children's services was involved (lines 640-2) and that this time was justified (line 651). The social worker then specifies that this is particularly needed in cases of child neglect (lines 651-4). The social worker acknowledges that her view

is not shared by everyone, and uses this description of the perceived views of others (denoted by ‘anybody’) to reaffirm her view which is not modified. She suggests that working for two years with this family was not deemed acceptable (lines 649-50), perhaps because local authorities are under pressure with fewer resources. She states that this period of time was longer than ‘anybody’s happy with us to do’ (lines 649-50) although ‘anybody’ is not further defined so we are unclear who did not feel that this was acceptable. The social worker’s view remains that extended periods of involvement are needed, confirmed through her comment about the two-year period being ‘time well spent’ (line 651).

Conclusion

Using thematic analysis, this chapter has specifically examined how ideals of social work with children and families are negotiated in social workers’ talk about their work with families when there were concerns about child neglect. It has also examined how children, parents and social workers are positioned within these ideals. Four cross-cutting ideals that coalesce with some of the themes described in Chapter 1 were identified in the data: protection from (risk of) harm, keeping children within their families, working in partnership with families and the appropriateness of the intervention to the circumstances. This confirms previous research that has shown the possibility of multiple discourses in social work talk about cases (Broadhurst, 2012; Hall & Slembrouck, 2011). However, I consider my findings to be significant because my study had a different design and took place in a different context. Moving forward, the identified ideals reflect the discussion in the earlier chapters and pave the way for the interactional data that comes next.

More specifically, embodied in these ideals are particular ways of positioning children, parents and the state and these were identified in the analysis. The ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm positions children as vulnerable and in need of protection and by implication as ‘objects for intervention’ (Jensen *et al.*, 2019, pg. 1). Parents are positioned as providing care that is problematic in some way and are implicitly or explicitly identified as culpable and, through the construction of an imperative for action, social workers and the institution are positioned as responsible for taking action to protect the child. Within this ideal, social workers’ resolution of

the tension between the individual and the social structural tends towards the former, with little reference to factors such as poverty and other adversities. Within the ideal of keeping children within their families, children are positioned as having their needs best met by their family, with the state performing a supportive role in this aim. Families, including wider kinship networks, are constructed as a significant resource but also parental care can be problematised if there are concerns about the risk of significant harm to children. The ideal of working in partnership with families positions parents as competent partners with much to contribute and positions professionals in a supportive and facilitative role. Lastly, the ideal of intervention needing to be appropriate and necessary, positions families as autonomous and recognises the impact on families of inappropriate and unnecessary intervention. The state is positioned as intervening in certain circumstances with the nature of the intervention corresponding with the needs and interests of the children and family.

These four ideals are present within the data but there are points of contention between them, particularly between, for example, the ideal of protection from (risk of) harm and the ideal of working in partnership with families. In considering how tensions and differences between ideals were managed, the analysis revealed an ordering of these ideals: the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm dominated within the social workers' accounts. Whilst on occasions, other ideals prevailed (see Extract 10), the dominant pattern was the prioritisation of the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm over other ideals when more than one ideal or perspective was being talked about. It was also used as a resource to construct the legitimacy of other ideals or to account for the rejection of other ideals. The relationships between and ordering of the ideals are represented in Figure 2.

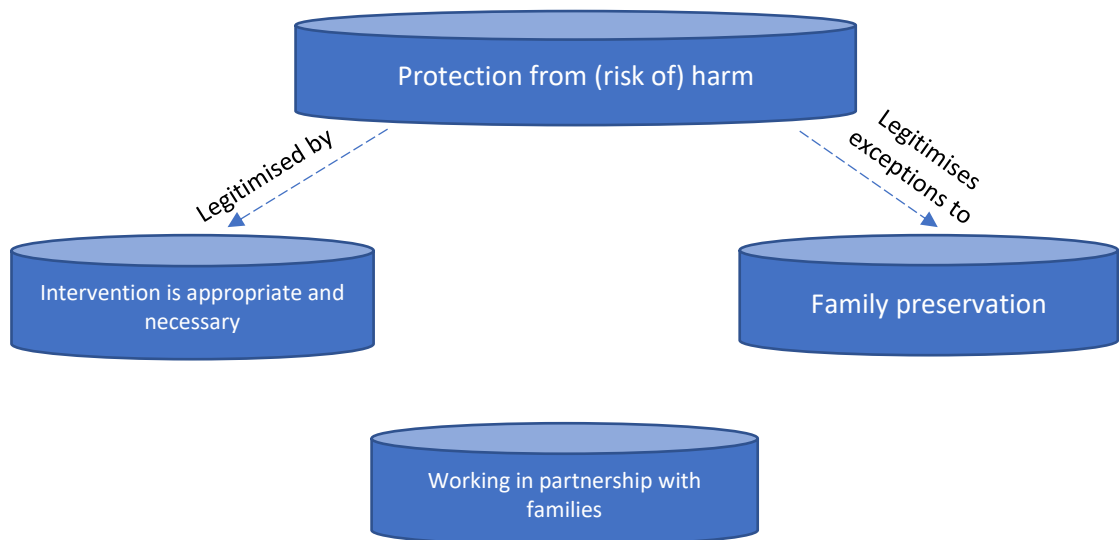


Figure 2: The relationships between and ordering of the ideals

Interestingly, the dominance of the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm contrasts with Keddell's (2013) study of a large NGO provider of child protection services in New Zealand that found that a discourse of family maintenance dominated. Whilst New Zealand has similarities to the UK in terms of its orientation towards child protection (Gilbert *et al.*, 2011), Keddell's research was carried out in a faith-based NGO that had implemented a Maori model of practice with a strong focus on family. The specific nature and focus of this organisation may have contributed to the difference between my findings and Keddell's.

Giving priority to the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm results in a dominant way of understanding children, parents and the relationship between the family and the state which reflects the wider context of our current child protection system. The concept of risk is elevated, children are predominantly understood as individuals with needs that are disassociated from the broader family context and parental failure is identified as the primary cause of child neglect. In this dominant approach, parents are understood as potentially risky to children if they do not fulfil their responsibilities. Consequently, the influence of structural factors, the most important of which is poverty, on parenting and families' circumstances is obscured. By prioritising the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm social workers are specifying a considerable role for the state to intervene to protect children when the

parental duty to care for children is not met (Fox Harding, 1991a). This is discussed in greater detail in the discussion chapter (Chapter 6).

Chapter 5: The dynamics of participation in child protection conferences

The second and complementary way that this study addresses the overarching research aim is through examining the approaches to working with parents and families that are constructed in child protection conferences. This is accomplished through exploring participation in these meetings and considering the ways that meeting participants position themselves and are positioned by others. The focus of this chapter is an interaction analysis of the nature and extent of parents' and professionals' participation in child protection conferences held because of concerns about neglect.

Child protection conferences are a critical juncture in the overall child protection process (Sidebotham *et al.*, 2016). Their purpose is to assess all relevant information and plan how best to safeguard and promote the welfare of a child who has suffered, or is at risk of, significant harm. They are inter-agency and multi-professional meetings and the participation of parents in child protection conferences is common today, reflecting efforts to work in partnership with parents (see Chapter 2). Recent research suggests that most child protection conferences have at least one parent in attendance (Koprowska, 2016; Richardson-Foster, 2016). However, whilst parents attend child protection conferences, this does not mean that their participation is equal when compared to that of professionals or that it has any meaningful impact on the decision making process. Previous research on interaction in child protection conferences has revealed that the participation of parents is constrained (Hall & Slembrouck, 2001; Koprowska, 2016), with parents undertaking a restricted range of interactional moves compared to professionals (Hall & Slembrouck, 2001) (see Chapter 2). This chapter elaborates on how these asymmetries of talk unfold interactionally by exploring in more detail the strategies and devices through which some contributions are prioritised and some are marginalised. To do this, it employs a conceptualisation of participation that focuses on its dynamic nature and attends to whether interactants are given or can claim the right to speak, the extent to which they can influence the content and direction of the interaction and, crucially, the consequentiality of their contributions, that is whether they are taken up by others,

accepted or validated (see Chapter 2). This conceptualisation of participation is contrasted with, and used to problematise, presence in meetings. Participation is also relevant to involvement in decision making (Hitzler & Messmer, 2010) and this chapter also considers the connection between the participation of different interactants and involvement and decision making.

The analysis in this chapter considers the participation of both parents and professionals in conferences held because of concerns about neglect in order to understand how meaningful participation is accomplished. The extracts included in this chapter were selected because they illustrate the core patterns of participation that emerged from the data. The organisation of turn-taking and its sequential properties forms the core of the analysis, informed by the conceptualisation of participation used in this study and set out in Chapter 2. The analysis focuses on how effective participation is achieved through negotiating authority or mobilising relevant ideals. The negotiation of authority is identified in the analysis through a focus on the following: how access to the floor is managed to enable or restrict the production of versions, how versions of events, actions and people are responded to interactionally (their uptake) and claims of epistemic authority and their interactional acceptance.

More specifically, the analysis shows how interactants gain access to the floor and how the floor is managed to enable or restrict the production of versions of events, actions and people. Drawing on existing research outlined in Chapter 2, the analysis demonstrates how linguistic features such as questions, direct invitations to take the floor and formulations are used (most often by chairs, but also by other professionals) to gain and to control access to the floor and manage the content and direction of the interaction. I also examine the uptake of the versions that are produced; how they are (not) validated or (not) accepted within the sequential management of the interaction. Here the focus is linguistic features that indicate agreement or disagreement, evaluative talk, response tokens and subsequent turns that construct alternative versions. Epistemic authority is enacted through displays of authority to speak about certain topics related to child neglect drawing on privileged knowledge which is interactionally accepted. Evident in the descriptions of events, actions and people are (explicit or implicit) references to ideals about children and

parenting. These relevant ideals underpin dominant versions and therefore are significant to effective participation.

The analysis examines the contributions of both professionals and parents. Whilst a range of different professionals (e.g. social workers, health visitors, teachers) who have different professional knowledge and expertise attend child protection conferences, the expectations in relation to safeguarding children outlined in Working Together (HM Government, 2018) apply to all professionals involved with children. Perhaps reflecting these expectations, professionals tended to perform similar interactional roles within the meeting, with the exception of the chair (the Independent Reviewing Officer who is an experienced social work manager). Chairs' contributions were often similar to other professionals' contributions but chairs also performed additional actions associated with their meeting participant role (Angouri & Marra, 2010). Professionals then, regardless of their specialism, predominantly occupy similar interactional roles in the child protection conference in terms of how they present and analyse information which are distinct from the role of the parents. For this reason, I have analysed professionals' contributions to the conference as a whole group.

Based on the analysis of how parents and professionals negotiate authority in the interaction and how they mobilise relevant ideals I propose a model which conceptualises participation in the child protection conference and its relationship with decision making (Figure 3). This model can be used to understand the extent of participation of both parents and professionals in the child protection conference. In the model, participation is directly connected to involvement in the decision making process. The greater the extent of participation, the greater the involvement in decision making and vice versa. The characteristics of decision making in meetings were discussed in Chapter 2. Specifically relevant to child protection conferences are decision making processes such as formulating the concerns and assessing information which form the basis of the articulated decision. In the model, participation is realised in an interactional context through the negotiation of authority or the mobilisation of relevant ideals. Meaningful participation is characterised by control over access to the floor and the content of turns and by the uptake and interactional acceptance of versions of events, actions or people and of

claims of epistemic authority. It is accomplished by interactants through successful enactment of authority in the interaction or when they successfully mobilise relevant ideals. Shallow participation, which involves limited control over opportunities to speak, limited control over the information produced and the lack of interactional acceptance of contributions, occurs when interactants' attempts to negotiate authority are ineffective or when the ideals that they index in their talk are rejected. The model, therefore, juxtaposes presence, which can also be conceptualised as shallow participation, with meaningful and consequential participation.

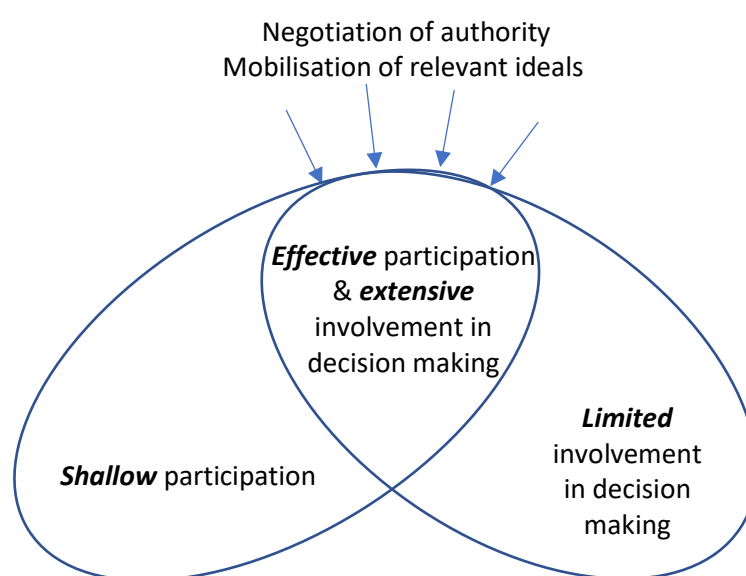


Figure 3: Model of participation in child protection conferences

Within the child protection conferences, parents' participation can be understood as shallow because they are less likely to successfully enact authority or successfully mobilise relevant ideals. However, there are some instances where parents enact authority and their contributions are interactionally accepted. Whilst the term shallow participation has been used in other areas such as participatory research (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995), public engagement in organisational decision making or community development (Cornwall, 2008) and participation in online learning (Kent *et al.*, 2016), I am using this term in this context to refer to limited interactional participation. In contrast, professionals frequently enact authority and relevant ideals about children and parenting underpin professionals' accepted versions of events, versions and people. Professionals' participation therefore is much more significant and influential. Consequently, professionals' involvement in decision making is

theorised as being greater than parents' whose shallow participation leads to limited involvement in decision making.

This chapter first outlines the different activities which take place within the trajectory of the child protection conference as an interactional event. Next, I examine a series of extracts which illustrate how the extent of interactional participation is realised through the negotiation of authority and the mobilisation of relevant ideals.

Stages of a child protection conference

In order to understand the trajectory of each child protection conference, the types of activities that occurred were mapped, drawing on Sarangi's (2010) concept of structural mapping. A child protection conference involves a series of interactional and institutional tasks that are accomplished in a similar order¹⁴. A traditional conference model as used in CPC2 tends to be more problem focused (Munro, 2010). There has been an increase in the use of solution focused models in conferences such as Signs of Safety (Turnell, 2012) (see Chapter 1) and this approach was used in CPC1 and CPC3. However, limited differences were apparent between the Signs of Safety conferences and the one that followed a traditional conference model and so they were not analysed separately. All of the conferences began with the preliminaries of opening the conference. This was followed by the information sharing section and then the analysis section, although in one conference these two sections occurred simultaneously. Towards the end of the conference came

¹⁴ The LA for CPC2 had a formal agenda that was available in the room on laminated sheets. The agenda consisted of 4 items:

- Information Sharing;
- Analysis of Risk Using LA Risk Assessment Model;
- Decision on whether the child should be subject to a Child Protection Plan;
- Formulation of Protection Plan

For CPC1 and CPC3, a Signs of Safety (Turnell, 2012) approach was taken, the main parts of which are the completion of a grid focusing on 'what are we worried about?', 'what's working well?' and 'what needs to happen?' plus a scaling question where meeting participants judge the safety of the child on a scale of 1-10. There was flexibility about when these aspects of the approach were undertaken in the meeting, although 'what needs to happen?' and the scaling question happened towards the end of the two conferences.

the articulated decision about whether a child protection plan was needed and the category of abuse and the formulation of the child protection plan but these two sections could be reversed. These tangible decisions were expressed by the chair immediately after they had canvassed the views of all other participants, including parents, about whether they thought a child protection plan was required and sometimes about what category of abuse or neglect should be used. All of the conferences ended with the closure of the meeting. The chairs of the meetings managed the transitions between different stages of the child protection conference and the extracts discussed in this chapter were predominantly from the information sharing and analysis sections of the conferences. Table 4 details the specific order of activities in each of the child protection conferences.

Table 4: Order of activities in each child protection conference

CPC1	CPC2	CPC3
Preliminaries	Preliminaries	Preliminaries
Information sharing	Information sharing	Information sharing (very short, only social worker and mother)
Analysis	Analysis	Analysis (also includes some information sharing)
Child protection plan	The decision	Child protection plan
The decision	Child protection plan	Analysis
Closure of meeting	Closure of meeting	The decision
		Closure of meeting

Figure 4 is a representation of the typical structure of a child protection conference and the type of activities that take place in each section, allowing for minor differences between the three conferences.

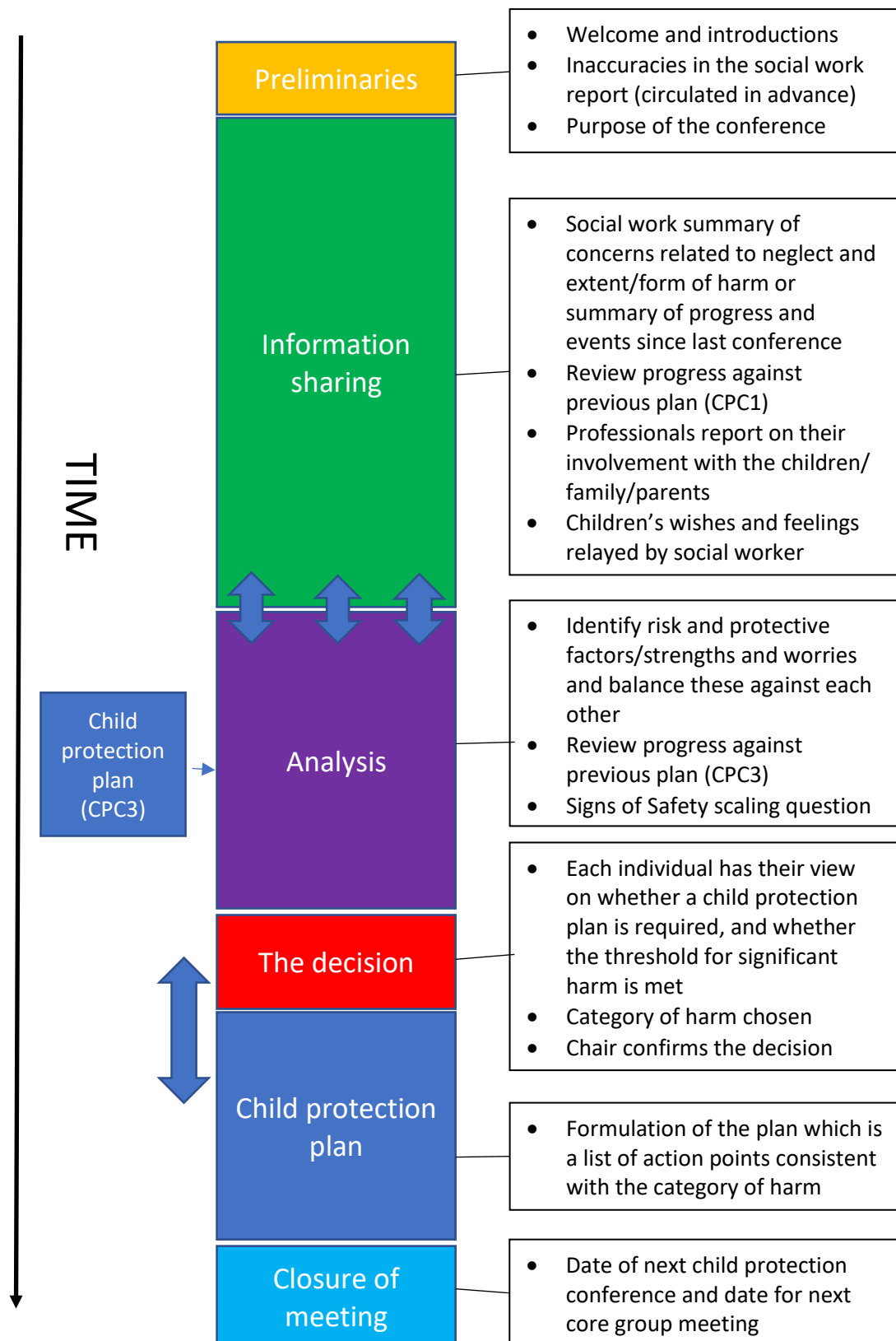


Figure 4: Typical structure of a child protection conference

Parents' shallow participation

This section considers examples where parents attempt to negotiate authority and mobilise relevant ideals. However, because the professionals' enactment of authority and their indexing of relevant ideals is more successful, then the extent of parents' effective participation is limited. Thus, parents' participation is interwoven with professionals' accomplishment of participation. The analysis focuses on three aspects of the negotiation of authority: floor management, claims of epistemic authority and the uptake of versions. I examine professionals' authority to manage the floor in order to grant or restrict the access of other interactants. I also consider parents' attempts to compete for the floor to illustrate how parents' participation is shallow because they have limited ability to control the floor. I discuss how professionals enact their epistemic authority to comment on children and their progress and needs, on parenting and on topics about which they have specialist expertise. The analysis considers how these displays of epistemic authority are interactionally accepted, something that occurs far less frequently in parents' contributions, again indicating their limited participation.

Of particular significance in assessing the extent of parents' participation is how their contributions are treated interactionally. I examine the uptake of parents' contributions by professionals to demonstrate how parents' perspectives or attempts at self-positioning are not interactionally accepted because professionals enact authority to validate or otherwise the contributions of parents. They do this through responses that do not acknowledge the content of the parents' turns or through explicitly rejecting the parents' contributions. For example, topic transitions, the selection of an alternative speaker, minimal response tokens and repeating the original concerns all function to progress the interaction without endorsing the parents' perspective. Explicit rejection of parents' contributions is evident in professionals' lexical choices such as 'but' and also when they propose contrasting perspectives. Consequently, in these examples, the participation of parents is shallow because their contributions are not accepted.

I also discuss how relevant ideals about children's needs and parenting underpin professionals' successful versions of events, actions and people and their enactment

of epistemic authority. In contrast, parents' versions that do not cohere with dominant ideals are not accepted, again illustrating the limited participation of parents. The extracts presented in this section are illustrative of the common patterns identified in the data relating to parents' limited participation. They illustrate that parents' shallow participation is indicative of their presence in these meetings rather than as full participants.

The first extract in this section comes towards the end of the child protection conference when progress against the plan that was made at the last conference is being reviewed. The conference is discussing the action points one by one to see if they have been actioned or achieved. This extract relates to the discussion of an action point regarding children's services seeking legal advice about whether the threshold for care proceedings had been met. In this extract the chair (CH) is explaining to the mother (M) why this action point was included in the last child protection plan. The chair dominates the interaction in this extract by enacting epistemic authority to comment on the mother's parenting and disposition and to describe the children's needs and discuss the potential impact on children of these needs not being met. This extract illustrates the limited participation of the mother because her contributions in this extract are minimal and signal acceptance of the chair's version of the situation and positioning of the mother.

Extract 5.1

CPC3

2150 CH Okay (.) okay a- and Julie that that was put in
 2151 because just I suppose about (.) because we know
 2152 that the children have been on plans before erm (.)
 2153 and what we spoke about earlier what I raised
 2154 earlier re- really was e- erm (.) it was wasn't your
 2155 lack of understanding [()]
 2156 M [yeah
 2157 CH It was your your attitude towards erm
 2158 M yeah
 2159 CH The whole sort of process really which is quite
 2160 serious
 2161 M Yeah I know
 2162 CH E:rm (.) and erm we just thought that that something
 2163 needed to be done to perhaps look at the future care
 2164 for the children ju- just to know that they were
 2165 being cared for and getting the things that they
 2166 needed erm on a regular basis like going to school I
 2167 mean it's their right isn't it

2168 M yeah
 2169 CH Basic right for erm for any child to get education
 2170 [it's not just about the education it's about you
 2171 M [education
 2172 CH know socialising it's about building
 2173 [their confidence (.) erm
 2174 M [seeing friends yeah
 2175 CH so yeah so even though they seem perhaps (.) at a
 2176 lower level erm they are significant in the way that
 2177 they can impact on on a child
 2178 M yeah
 2179 CH In the long term not just immediately () short
 2180 term but in the long term as well but I'm hearing
 2181 that the children are really bright children so so
 2182 that's good we just need them to get to their full
 2183 potential
 2184 M yeah
 2185 CH Okay (.) [so

In the discussion of the mother's attitude, the main focus of this extract, the chair enacts epistemic authority to assess the mother's disposition towards the child protection process. The mother does not challenge this but accepts the chair's negative positioning of her. The chair identifies two main reasons why an action point about children's services seeking legal advice was included in the child protection plan: that the children had been on child protection plans previously (lines 2151-2), suggesting a history of problems, and the mother's attitude towards the process (lines 2157-60). The mother's attitude is not explicitly formulated as problematic because no further details are given as to the nature of her attitude (although it is discussed earlier in the conference). However, when it is given as a reason for children's services seeking legal advice then it can be construed as an attitude that is problematic in some way and that has impeded the success of the previous plans (lines 2151-2) since the same situation persists. This discussion of the mother's attitude positions the mother as not responding in an appropriate or acceptable way to child protection concerns and, therefore, as not fitting in with expectations of the 'client' role. What is significant here is that the chair claims authority to discuss to the mother's disposition towards the child protection process, something that an individual would usually have authority over. Attitudes or dispositions when theorised as individual psychological or cognitive states would be something that an individual has a greater right than others to know and make claims about this knowledge, known as epistemic primacy (Stivers *et al.*, 2011). In this extract however the chair claims epistemic access (without any mitigation) to the

mother's perspective on the child protection process. This is validated by the mother who agrees with the chair's assessment of her disposition in lines 2158 and 2161.

Not only does the chair display authority to claim knowledge about the mother's disposition, her positioning of the mother is not positive. As discussed above, the mother's attitude is identified as problematic and as a barrier to progress. The chair directly identifies the cause of the mother's response to the child protection process as the mother's attitude (line 2157) rather than being due to a lack of understanding (lines 2154-5) or any other contextual considerations that may have been mitigating and which would exculpate the mother from blame. This is a potentially face-threatening act in terms of the mother as a hearer (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1955). It is theorised that interactants use strategies to avoid or reduce face threats (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1955), but this does not happen in this instance. The chair offers no mitigation with regard to how the mother is described. Moreover, the mother does not attempt to account for the gap between action and expectation by providing an account that attempts to mitigate or renegotiate responsibility (Scott & Lyman, 1968), a situation which is usually grounds for the production of an account (see Extract 5.5). Therefore, by accepting the chair's problematisation of her attitude, the mother is validating the authority of the chair to comment on her deficits.

The chair also enacts her epistemic authority, as a child protection professional, to discuss what children need and what they are entitled to. This authority is accepted by the mother. In lines 2162-73 the chair continues her explanation of why an action point about children's services seeking legal advice was included in the last child protection plan. She focuses on the possibilities of future care for the children which would ensure that their needs were being met. In addition to talking about children's needs, the chair also talks about the basic right for children to attend school and have an education, invoking a rights discourse, but also extends the benefits of attending school to include socialising and confidence building. This enacted authority to talk about children's needs and their rights without the need to seek or take into account the mother's view is not challenged by any of the interactants and the mother agrees with the chair and repeats or rephrases what she has said (lines 216, 2171, 2174, 2178).

The chair then further enacts epistemic authority to discuss impact of concerns on children and identify their needs and again this authority is validated by the mother. An extended upshot formulation (Heritage & Watson, 1979) is produced by the chair in lines 2175-80. The research literature demonstrates that formulations, which involve a summary of an understanding of the previous discussion (Raclaw & Ford, 2015), are important devices in meetings, performing numerous functions such as topic management and can influence decision making (Barnes, 2007; Clifton, 2009; Holmes & Stubbe, 2015; Huisman, 2001) (see Chapter 2). It appears that the chair is referring to concerns when she says ‘they seem perhaps (.) at a lower level’. However, it is unclear whether she is referring to concerns about the children in this family or more generically about children that are involved with children’s services. The upshot part of the chair’s formulation is that the consequences of ‘lower level’ concerns can still be significant for children over the short- and long-term. Here the chair is enacting her authority as a child protection professional to assess the impact of concerns on children in relation to a developmental trajectory and cumulative calculation over time. At the end of the extract the chair refers positively to information presented earlier in the conference about the academic performance of the children (lines 2180-3) and states that ‘we just need to get them to their full potential’ (lines 2182-3). Again, the chair enacts her epistemic authority as a child protection professional to determine a parental deficit and state what the children need and the mother agrees with this (line 2184). Consequently, the chair’s enactment of authority is not challenged by the mother, rather it is explicitly validated, illustrating how authority is interactionally negotiated.

This extract demonstrates the enacted epistemic authority of the chair to talk about the children’s needs and the impact on children when their needs are not met. It also demonstrates professional authority to, both implicitly and explicitly, position the mother in terms of not having fulfilled aspects of her parental role and as not meeting the expectations of her as a parent involved with children’s services because of concerns about her ‘attitude’ rather than her ‘lack of understanding’. Inherent in the chair’s formulations about the children’s needs, their rights and the impact on children when their needs are not met are ideals about children’s needs and the exclusive role of parents in meeting these needs. The indexing of these ideals also

supports the professional dominance in this section of interaction. In contrast, the mother's contributions are minimal and she accepts the chair's depictions of her and her parenting and does not attempt to challenge them. In this extract therefore the mother's participation is shallow because she does not contribute her own perspective. Instead, she agrees with the chair's less than positive evaluation of the situation and validates the chair's authority.

In the next extract the parents' contributions are much lengthier, however their participation is still limited because they do not have unrestricted access to the floor as they cannot speak exactly when they choose. The chair's authority is evident in her control of the floor which is accomplished through agenda setting and the explicit selection of speakers. Additionally, the parents' contributions are not interactionally accepted by the chair, further demonstrating the chair's enactment of authority and the parents' limited participation.

Extract 5.2

CPC2

673 CH That's helpful any questions on Finley from anyone
 674 before we go to parents anything so start with mum
 675 anything you wanna s- add anything you wanna say
 676 about your son anything you wanna disagree with
 677 that's been said
 678 M Nothing that I wanna disagree with but I know what my
 679 kids my kids hav- you know I might have slipped a
 680 little bit over the last couple of months but (.) I'm
 681 getting the help that I need now and I know that
 682 they're gonna achieve their full potential (.)
 683 [d'you know mi- i- Finley
 684 CH [okay
 685 M Absolutely gorgeous bright little boy
 686 CH Okay and dad anything you wanna say
 687 F I think he's he's a good learner he just he he's just
 688 he picks up things so quick and he just he's amazing
 689 he's just such a I just wish I could be there more to
 690 help () to achieve his potential
 691 CH Okay and er (.) from I'll now come to paternal
 692 grandmother as the in my role as IRO for the looked
 693 after children's review is there anything that you
 694 want to tell us about how they've been since they've
 695 been with you

In this extract, the chair controls the floor by selecting the mother and father to speak at specific points and by reclaiming the floor after they have each spoken to manage

the transition to the next topic. The professionals involved with the children have previously outlined their concerns about the children (not shown). Before the conference moves on to discussing the parents' own issues, the chair offers the opportunity to the mother to comment on what has been said previously about the youngest child (lines 673-6). The chair initially frames this in terms of adding or saying something additional. However, at the end of her turn she asks if there is anything the mother wants to disagree with (lines 676-7), perhaps expecting that there will be disagreement from mother. After the mother has spoken, the chair regains the floor and manages the transition of topics by selecting the father as the next speaker. The father comments positively on the abilities of the eldest child and states that he wishes he was able to be there more to help the child reach his potential (lines 687-90). Again, the chair enacts authority to manage the floor and moves directly to another topic after the father's turn. She does this by using the discourse marker 'okay' in the turn-initial position (line 691) which has been shown to be one of the practices used to manage topic transition in meetings (Svennevig, 2012b). The additional meta comments about the next agenda item also signal this topic transition. We can see here in the chair's turns, her control of the floor through setting the agenda of what is going to happen next ('before we go to parents') and through next speaker selection ('so start with mum', 'and dad anything you wanna say'). Therefore, in this extract, the parents are not in control of when they take the floor and are not able to enact authority, illustrating their shallow participation. Similarly, earlier research identified that parents, instead of being able to initiate the contribution of information, were predominantly in the position of responding to professionals (Hall & Slembrouck, 2001).

As well as selecting speakers and managing the transition of topics, the chair's turns also perform another function: they respond to the parents' immediately preceding turns. In this extract, the chair's responses do not interactionally validate the parents' contributions, illuminating the parents' limited participation. In the mother's response to the chair, she talks about her recent difficulties, how she is addressing these and about her children's futures (lines 678-85). The next turn by the chair (lines 686) does not indicate acceptance of the mother's construction of herself and of her wishes for her children. Instead, the chair immediately accomplishes a topic transition to asking for the father's contribution. Consequently, the mother's

contribution is not interactionally accepted because it is immediately followed by a transition to another topic, the father's view. In a similar way, the father's contribution and his desires for the eldest child (lines 687-90) are not interactionally validated by the chair.

The previous two extracts were illustrative of the parents' shallow participation in terms of the parents not attempting to challenge the contributions and authority of the professionals. However, in the dataset there were also occasions when parents made (unsuccessful) attempts to control the interaction and provide their own versions of events, actions or people. Extract 5.3 is an example of when a parent (a mother) attempts to negotiate authority and control the interaction by competing for the floor and producing dispreferred responses to the questions posed. She also attempts to produce her own constructions of the situation in the form of excuses and justifications after the production of the professional view. However, these attempts are ultimately unsuccessful because the professional view dominates through the enactment of authority. This is accomplished through the use of questions to control the topic and the selection of speakers and through formulating and summarising which reiterate or upgrade the original concerns. Questions are a type of turn that professionals usually have a greater right to produce in institutional interaction than 'laypersons' (Atkinson & Drew, 1979; Drew & Heritage, 1992b; Ehrlich & Freed, 2010) and have an important function in allocating turns and topic management (Ford, 2008; Holmes & Chiles, 2010). This extract also specifically illustrates the importance of references to ideals about children and parenting to the successful interactional acceptance of particular versions of events, actions and people, a common pattern in the data. These kinds of relevant ideals are mobilised in the contributions and versions of professionals which dominate whereas the mother's contributions centre on her recent difficult experiences and are not successful interactionally, further illustrating her shallow participation. (HV = health visitor, T = teacher, N = nursery).

Extract 5.3

CPC2

835 HV Erm ((colleague))'s prepared a report s- to give us
836 sort of an idea of the contacts since since he's been
837 born and there is sort of a pattern of erm of DNA's

838 so not attending appointments erm then the thing
 839 that's outstanding is the speech and language so
 840 we've initially made the referral in July last year
 841 CH uhuh
 842 HV And to our knowledge he hasn't been for an
 843 appointment is that right
 844 M When was the appointment for
 845 HV Well you will have received the appointment so we
 846 make the referral which we did [in July and then you
 847 M [yeah
 848 HV will have had Contact from the speech and language
 849 department erm [to arrange an appointment
 850 M [I'm pretty sure one of the
 851 appointments were erm on the day that Finley started
 852 school
 853 HV Okay I mean I haven't got that appointment erm but
 854 it's sort of just to highlight that this that it was
 855 picked up last summer [and it's still an issue that's
 856 CH [yeah
 857 HV ongoing and what's ((colleague)) recorded
 858 [is that you're not concerned
 859 M [I have attended an appointment with Marion up at
 860 the children's Hightown children's centre did they
 861 tell you that
 862 HV Yeah she's a nurse [one of the nursery nurses
 863 M [yeah
 864 HV [yeah she's
 865 M [and she give me some advice which I've been
 866 following
 867 HV Yeah that's good
 868 M But also obviously they do speech and language at the
 869 nursery
 870 HV [yeah
 871 N [and er Natalie erm said that we could refer directly
 872 which is what we've done but I just need it signing
 873 ()
 874 HV Yeah so th- that's just to say that [we we did that
 875 CH [yeah
 876 HV direct referral July last year and it's still
 877 CH It's still outstanding
 878 HV It's still outstanding yeah
 879 CH Okay and mum's saying that she thinks that referral
 880 was erm made for the day that h- he was at school or
 881 [started school
 882 M [I'm sure I'm sure there was one appointment
 883 [that was
 884 CH [did you rebook it
 885 M Erm I w- d'you know what Finley's had his grommets
 886 done erm over that period of time as well so we had a
 887 lot going on with the hospital and stuff
 888 CH uhuh
 889 M Erm there was a few other things that had happened
 890 round that period of time as well
 891 CH uhuh
 892 HV [I mean we can I can check that for you and have all
 893 M [I can't recollect right right this second but there

894 HV [that info
 895 M [was a lot going on
 896 ? Umm yeah
 897 M [My grandad had his heart attack it was just
 898 everything just went to pot it was a [nightmare
 899 CH [okay [okay
 900 ? yeah
 901 CH But it's something we need to prioritise [isn't it
 902 M [yeah yeah
 903 well I I've spoken to ((nursery manager)) about it so
 904 it's not like I haven't done anything
 905 CH uhuh
 906 M D'you know what I mean

 [[37 lines omitted]]

 940 T So other people can advise you about speech and
 941 language but obviously the therapists are the
 942 specialists that will really give Dylan the help he
 943 needs but if you erm get an appointment and you don't
 944 go to it or inform them they will discharge you
 945 N yeah
 946 M No I'm well [aware of that
 947 T [so so if you
 948 M I just the- just like I said like the time that I was
 949 having at the time it just you know
 950 T yep
 951 M I mean check the dentist they've been to the dentist
 952 they've been to the optician d'you know what I mean
 953 T Yep yep
 954 ? That's why ()
 955 M It's not that I've literally [you know [refused to go
 956 CH [okay [le-
 957 M [It wasn't like
 958 CH [er I'm gonna come back to you about the dentist and
 959 optician cause that's helpful [to know I- just let me
 960 M [yeah

This extract concerns a speech and language therapy appointment that has been missed and the mother's subsequent explanation of why that was. At the start of the extract, the health visitor provides a summary of the concerns about the family's lack of engagement with the health visiting service (lines 835-843). They have missed appointments (DNA = did not attend) and the health visitor identifies a speech and language therapy appointment as outstanding. This is followed by a question to the mother, giving her the opportunity to correct erroneous information. The kind of tag question used here is a control device with agreement as the expected answer (Holmes & Chiles, 2010). However, the mother does not provide the preferred response of yes (see Chapter 2). Instead, she asks a question instead about the date of

the appointment (lines 844), signalling a dispreferred response. Here the mother is attempting to affect the direction of the interaction by responding in a way that does not conform to expectation, thus challenging the authority of professionals to control the floor and shape the interaction. The mother's use of a question here is also a powerful move because it shifts the topic to the mother's interest in the timing of the appointment (Ford, 2010). These findings confirm previous findings about parents' resistance in meetings that was enacted through unmarked and minimal responses or the production of disaligned responses or challenges to authority (Broadhurst *et al.*, 2012).

Following the contributions from the health visitor, the mother attempts to secure the floor to explain why the appointment was missed, seen in the overlap in lines 849-50. The mother interprets the health visitor's 'erm' in line 849 as a possible transition relevant place (TRP) and takes the floor. The health visitor continues her turn whilst being aware of the overlap, something which can signal turn competition (Jefferson, 2004). The mother treats the health visitor's assertion about the missed appointment as requiring an account for the gap between action and expectation (Scott & Lyman, 1968). Whilst the mother is not explicitly identified by the health visitor as being responsible for the child not attending the appointment, the failure of the mother to fulfil their role responsibilities in relation to the child's health needs is implied. The mother's first response (lines 850-2) is to state that appointment clashed with a sibling's first day at school. This response is in the format of an excuse which seeks to mitigate responsibility, something which has been found in other research into interaction in child protection conferences (Koprowska, 2016). Research that has considered interactional strategies for producing defences in response to blame attributions categorises excuses as accounts which detail extenuating circumstances which explain behaviour in a way which seeks to reduce blameworthiness (Aronsson & Cederborg, 2012; Dingwall *et al.*, 1995; Scott & Lyman, 1968). The suggestion is that the mother could not be expected to be in two places at once or miss the sibling's first day at school.

The health visitor's response to the mother's attempt to mitigate responsibility (lines 853-8) initially indicates that the excuse might be accepted because the turn is prefaced by 'okay'. However, she goes on to reiterate the original concerns

indicating that the mother's explanation for why she missed the appointment is not accepted interactionally. This confirms earlier research that found that professionals' versions dominated and that parents' versions were frequently resisted (Hall *et al.*, 1999). This lack of acceptance of the mother's explanation illustrates that, whilst the mother has attempted to enact authority through pursuing opportunities to access and control the floor, her contributions are not ultimately validated.

After the health visitor repeats the original concerns in lines 853-5 she adds a further problem about the mother not being concerned (lines 857-8) which upgrades the original concern. The health visitor is suggesting that not only has the mother failed to take the child to the appointment, she is also unconcerned about the child's speech and language delay. The health visitor draws on an ideal about parents being concerned about their children to position the mother as not fulfilling her parenting role. Again, the overlap in lines 858-9 is indicative of the mother's attempt to compete for the floor. She does not allow for the gist of the health visitor's turn to be produced, rather she starts to talk whilst the health visitor continues her turn. After the health visitor completes her turn the mother secures the floor to offer an account which takes the form of a justification. In Scott and Lyman's (1968) classic typology of accounts, justifications are accounts which accept responsibility but seek to redefine the concern as non-blameworthy (see also Aronsson & Cederborg, 2012; Dingwall *et al.*, 1995; Koprowska, 2016). The mother states that she has taken the child to a different type of appointment to discuss his speech and language delay (lines 859-61), positioning herself as having taken action to address the child's difficulties. In lines 865-6 the mother further describes the action she has taken by saying that she has been following the advice given at the appointment. Again, the mother competes for the floor and secures it to produce this turn, indicated by the overlapping talk (lines 864-5) and the health visitor's unfinished turn (Schegloff, 2000).

By talking about the advice she was given and has followed and about the role of the nursery in addressing speech and language difficulties (line 868-9), the mother attempts to build a picture of herself as someone who is taking action to address the problem. This specifically addresses the health visitor's charge of not being concerned. Yet her attempts to produce an alternative version of the problem first

described by the health visitor are not successful when the responses of the health visitor and the chair in lines 874-8 are considered. Here the original concern is reiterated for a second time in a formulation jointly produced by the health visitor and the chair. The two professionals enact their authority by reiterating their concerns which acts to reject the mother's explanations and alternative versions provided so far. Whilst the mother attempts to influence the direction of the interaction by competing for the floor (which is sometimes successful) and depicting herself in a different way to how she is positioned by professionals, ultimately the professionals have authority interactionally over which versions of events are privileged and the mother's participation is shallow.

The chair then further upgrades the concern to include having failed to re-book the appointment as well as having missed the original one. The chair uses reported speech to formulate the mother's explanation for why she could not take the child to the appointment (lines 879-81). The mother aligns with the chair and begins to confirm her certainty about the appointment clash (line 882-3). However, the mother cedes the floor to the chair (the mother's turn is unfinished) who asks, in the form of a direct question, whether the mother re-booked the appointment that was made for the same day as the eldest child's first day at school (line 884). The chair's turn demonstrates the authority of the chair to gain access to the floor and control it through the use of overlapping talk and the use of questions (Halvorsen, 2015; Holmes & Chiles, 2010). In response to the chair's questioning, the mother goes on to produce a series of excuses about the difficult time she was having around the time of the appointment (lines 885-7, lines 889-90, line 893-5, lines 897-8, lines 948-9) which increase in the severity of the difficulty reported. The mother's response does not answer the chair's question directly with the expected yes or no response. Instead the speech perturbations at the start of the response signal that the mother's production of excuses is the dispreferred response. These excuses formulated by the mother accept that she did not take the child to the appointment or re-book it but function to mitigate her responsibility for not doing so. She positions herself as being prevented from taking action by external circumstances.

The lack of acceptance of the mother's versions of events continues with the chair emphasising that the speech and language delay needs to be given priority. The chair

responds to the mother's series of excuses with minimal response tokens (Gardner, 2001) which can signal impending disagreement (Pomerantz, 1984). This is the eventual response of the chair in line 901 who begins the turn with 'but' which marks lack of acceptance of the excuses (Schiffrin, 1987). The mother treats the chair's comment about prioritising the speech and language delay as a further charge and goes on to formulate herself as being concerned by stating that she has spoken to the nursery about it (lines 903-4) and refocuses the discussion on the action that she has taken. Again, the mother's formulations that attempt to present the situation differently are not interactionally accepted. Consequently, the professional version dominates because of the chair's successful enactment of authority and consequently the mother's participation is limited.

The last part of the extract (after the omitted lines) involves a contribution by the teacher. This section of interaction contains the most explicit rejection of the mother's version of the situation and the most explicit attribution of responsibility to the mother illustrating the authority of professionals to position others and also to reject the versions provided by others. The teacher's turn in lines 940-4 is prefaced by the discourse marker 'so' signalling the accomplishment of an issue that has been pending for the speaker (Bolden, 2006). The teacher addresses the mother's action of having taken the child to another appointment and rejects this as insufficient by pointing out that the child needs to see a specialist which has not happened (lines 940-4). The teacher explicitly attributes the responsibility for the appointment not being re-booked to the mother illustrating that the previous excuses and justifications have not been accepted. The teacher's turn explicitly indexes expectations about children's needs that should be met and responsabilises the mother in terms of her lack of action to access specialist help for the child. The mother produces further justification of her inaction and then points out that she has taken the children to the dentist and optician (lines 951-2) as a way of demonstrating that she does take them to important appointments. She also reinforces that she has not 'refused to go' to the appointment, making relevant the external circumstances that she described earlier. The chair's response to the mother's list of appointments that the children have attended is to specify that further information will be sought shortly (lines 958-9). Here the chair establishes her authority to control access to the floor by deferring the mother's opportunity to provide more information. The chair's response to the

mother's formulation about the difficult time she was having does not explicitly acknowledge or accept the mother's contribution and illustrates the mother's limited participation.

In this extract, the mother attempts to influence the direction of the interaction by endeavouring to secure the floor through talking at the same time as others resulting in overlap. The mother persists and either secures the floor after the professionals have finished talking or professionals cede the floor to her leaving their turns unfinished. The questions that the mother is asked by the professionals are responded to in a dispreferred way, perhaps because responding in the preferred format would have required admission of culpability without an explanation of the circumstance. It may also be because parents may be more willing to disregard interactional conventions to present their version or address the attribution of responsibility in meetings which are decisive and which can be a precursor to care proceedings which could ultimately result in significant changes to where the child lives and to who has/shares parental responsibility for the child.

When she secures the floor, the mother responds to the professionals' positioning of her as not fulfilling her role responsibilities and attempts to redeem herself and explain her circumstances through the production of a series of excuses and justifications (Aronsson & Cederborg, 2012; Dingwall *et al.*, 1995; Koprowska, 2016; Scott & Lyman, 1968). However, ultimately the authority of the professionals dominates. Predominantly, they are the ones that ask questions which are used to control the direction of the interaction and the selection of speakers. Professionals also summarise information and produce formulations which regulates the information that is prioritised. In response to the mother's excuses and justifications, the professionals enact their authority by reiterating the concerns, upgrading the concerns or leaving them unacknowledged, a finding that is consistent with previous studies on child protection conferences and similar meetings (Broadhurst *et al.*, 2012; Koprowska, 2016). Consequently, in this web of negotiation with both the mother and professionals attempting to classify the mother's (in)actions differently, the mother's versions are not interactionally accepted and the professionals retain authority over the validation and acceptance of versions. This illustrates the limited

participation of the mother and the centrality of enacting authority to effective participation by professionals.

Relevant ideals about children's needs and parenting underpin the authoritative versions of professionals. However, the versions produced by the mother do not accord with the professionals' versions and therefore with the ideals that are referenced. Therefore, the mobilising of these kinds of ideals is central to establishing a version which is interactionally accepted and potentially more challenging to refute. When the mother's versions do not embody the ideals proposed by professionals, they are not validated interactionally. Consequently, the participation of the mother is shallow because her contributions fail to mobilise relevant ideals.

Extract 5.4 illustrates how an attempt by another professional (C = representative from a charity supporting those experiencing homelessness, poverty, drug and alcohol problems) to support the father's version of events, which contrasts with the chair's depiction of the father's actions, still results in shallow participation from the father. This is because the contributions of both the father and the charity worker are not interactionally accepted. In fact, their versions of events are explicitly rejected. In this extract, the chair's version dominates, illustrating the distinctiveness of the role of the chair to enact authority and restrict or enable access to the floor and (in)validate the versions and positions of both parents and other professionals. Again, the chair mobilises relevant ideals about the extent of the efforts parents should make to address their problems in order to secure effective participation in the interaction. This contrasts with the father's problematisation of the substance misuse provision, supported by the charity worker, which does not index these kinds of ideals and therefore leads to the rejection of his contributions and his limited participation.

Extract 5.4

CPC2

1577 CH So you really need to get yourself to ((substance
1578 misuse)) [((service))
1579 F [yeah yeah I've got myself I've been
1580 ((substance misuse service)) about three times and
1581 I've sat there one time I sat there for two hours

1582 and forty five minutes and then they come out and
 1583 says oh () there's no one can see you er we're so
 1584 understaffed and it was ()
 1585 CH Yeah [it's just one of those things
 1586 F [yeah I know I
 1587 CH It's not good [that's not good
 1588 F [I have I have () and I have asked
 1589 them to (.) like call you like (.) like interact
 1590 with you so
 1591 P okay
 1592 C Erm this is an ongoing thing with ((substance misuse
 1593 service)) we work with a lot of drug addicts we've
 1594 now arranged [that
 1595 CH [as we do
 1596 C Er [((substance misuse service))
 1597 CH [but the other parents I have to say do manage to
 1598 get there and they have also waited
 1599 [sometimes [as long as you
 1600 C [no what I was gonna
 1601 F [yes yeah
 1602 CH It's not good
 1603 F Yeah yeah no no and I () yeah
 1604 CH It's not good that wait that long but some of the
 1605 parents are so committed that they'll wait an hour
 1606 two hours three hours and they'll come in and
 1607 they'll say I waited three hours but I was
 1608 determined to do it sorry you wanted to say

Both the chair and the father contribute their perspectives on the father's attempts to access the substance misuse service. However, the father's version is not interactionally accepted. The chair enacts deontic authority (Stevanovic & Peräkylä, 2012) to direct the father to attend a substance misuse service; by implication this is something that has not yet happened (lines 1577-8). However, instead of agreeing to this directive, the father attempts to produce his own authoritative version. He outlines his experiences of attempting to access the substance misuse service, proposing that the problem lies with the substance misuse service rather than his efforts to access help for his drug addiction (lines 1579-84). The chair acknowledges the difficulties with the capacity of the substance misuse service but implies that the father needs to accept that these are the circumstances that he has to deal with ('it's just one of those things', line 1585). The response of the chair indicates that the father's excuse is not accepted. This prompts him to produce a justification in lines 1588-90 which outlines another action he has taken: asking the substance misuse service to contact his probation officer. The father uses this justification to attempt to position himself as some who is taking action to try and resolve his problems.

In contrast to the trajectory of the interaction in the previous extracts, in this extract another professional (C) attempts to support the father's position but this is unsuccessful. The charity worker confirms that access to the substance misuse service is an ongoing problem and begins to outline what the charity are trying to do to alleviate the problem (lines 1592-4, line 1596). However, the charity worker is interrupted by the chair whose talk overlaps (line 1597). By enacting authority to manage access to the floor (lines 1595, 1597, 1599) the chair restricts the ability of the charity worker to produce a complete turn in support of the father and access to the floor is only granted at the end of the extract. Instead, the chair formulates the father's attempts to access the substance misuse service as problematic. This is accomplished by comparing his actions with other parents who wait long periods of time to be seen at the substance misuse service and then emphasising their commitment and determination to be seen whilst also acknowledging the long waiting times (lines 1597-9, 1604-8).

This extract also illustrates how relevant ideals are significant to accomplishing effective participation. The chair's contributions are underpinned by ideals about the lengths parents should go to in attempting to address their problems. Despite the father providing an explanation for why he could not be seen by the substance misuse service, he is positioned in contrast to the other parents as not making strenuous enough efforts to begin addressing his problematic substance misuse. This comparison with other parents functions to reject the father's positioning of himself and also the charity worker's attempt to support the father. Consequently, the chair's version is the one that endures. Because the version of events provided by the father and supported by the charity worker does not embrace the ideals about the efforts parents should make to address their problems made relevant by the chair, it is not accepted.

As in the previous extracts, and illustrating the common pattern in the data, the father's participation is shallow because he is unable to successfully enact authority or mobilise relevant ideals. This is despite his attempts to propose his own version of the reason why he has not been able to access the substance misuse service. What is distinctive about this extract is that not only is the father's version not accepted but

so is the attempted support of the father by the charity worker. This is accomplished through the restriction of her access to the floor and through the chair's problematisation of the father's (in)actions. Thus, the chair enacts authority to mediate access to the floor and to validate or otherwise versions of events and selves with respect to all interactants, not just parents. The chair's 'institutional authority to moderate the talk' (Asmuß & Svennevig, 2009 pg. 11) and her 'powerful position' as 'meeting controller' (Angouri & Mondada, 2018, pg. 473) are evident here.

The next extract is part of an extended sequence in which a teacher reports on a child's progress in school. It involves a discussion about a child whose hunger in school has been noted. The explanation for this hunger is negotiated between the parents and several professionals (teacher 1, teacher 2, teacher 3 and the health visitor) resulting in a successful (re)categorization of the problem as stemming from the child becoming used to having two breakfasts because of the education provision he previously attended (The Nook). This extract again illustrates the typical pattern of limited participation of parents identified across the data. In this extract, the limited participation of the parents is evident because the explanation they offer for the concern is rejected by a professional who enacts authority to interactionally validate or otherwise the contributions of the parents. However, in this extract, in contrast to other extracts, the parents end up explicitly endorsing the explanation formulated by the professionals rather than maintaining their own differing position. Yet this still results in shallow participation as the parents' contributions are supportive of others rather than having the authority to secure an accepted version of their own. This extract also illustrates the importance of relevant ideals to whether participation is effective or not, representing a common pattern in the data. The parents do not mobilise accepted ideals within their explanation and consequently their participation is limited because their initial perspective is rejected. Conversely, the professionals' mobilisation of relevant ideals results in a dominant explanation and their effective participation.

Extract 5.5

CPC1

1945 T3 Okay well we can perhaps look into supporting you
 1946 with that and see what we can do erm his teacher's
 1947 commented that he always s- seems quite hungry in

1948 school but she's not sure whether that's he's not
 1949 having enough to eat or he's just got quite a big
 1950 appetite
 1951 M No [(.) that's he has breakfast like everyone else
 1952 F [no he has breakfast ()
 1953 M but if Ethan can get attention
 1954 ? yeah
 1955 M or extra attention then he will [try and get it
 1956 F [()
 1957 T3 okay
 1958 M Because there's been a few occasions when he was at
 1959 ((previous school)) when he's done exactly the same
 1960 thing
 1961 T3 right
 1962 T1 Yeah but also if we think about it The Nook as part
 1963 of The Nook's provision () they have snack they
 1964 have toast and things [so he may well be he's
 1965 T3 [he could really be noticing the
 1966 T1 [probably used
 1967 T3 [difference
 1968 F He's having two breakfasts [that's what it is yeah
 1969 T1 [so he would [have he
 1970 SW [(laugh))
 1971 T1 would have breakfast at home and then at The Nook
 1972 [they'd have
 1973 F [yeah yeah
 1974 T1 Breakfast again as part of their provision their
 1975 nurture provision so for him to h- to to not have
 1976 that I know if I'd had two breakfasts
 1977 [and I'd been used to it I'd be notice that I hadn't
 1978 T3 [you really would notice it
 1979 T1 eaten
 1980 F yeah
 1981 T1 So maybe just maybe that=
 1982 HV =could be=
 1983 T1 [maybe he needs a little bit of an extra
 1984 T3 [yeah it's a good point
 1985 T2 And they said that part of as part of his time out
 1986 sometimes they [would go and have toast with him and
 1987 T1 [they would (.) they would have toast
 1988 T2 top him up so=
 1989 ? =yeah
 1990 T1 So it's [that kind of that nurture and that
 1991 T2 [kind of just got used to it
 1992 T1 [quality time
 1993 M [and what was it breakfast waffles (1.0) with
 1994 [chocolate [spread on them
 1995 F [yeah yeah [yeah
 1996 M
 1997 F
 1998 ? yeah
 1999 HV He will be missing [that
 2000 T3 [well he will definitely be
 2001 missing that
 2002 ((everyone laughs))

T3 produces a description of the concern that the child ‘seems quite hungry in school’ (lines 1947-8) and offers two possible explanations for why the child seems hungry at school (lines 1948-50). The parents respond to the concern raised by the teacher, not by formulating excuses and justifications (see Extract 5.3), but by directly rebutting the perceived charge (the parents’ turns in lines 1951-2 are both prefaced by ‘no’). They also provide a candidate reason for why the child might be saying that he is hungry (lines 1951-5). The mother’s explanation suggests that the child is saying that he is hungry to get attention which moves the focus to the child as the location of the problem. In lines 1958-60 the mother provides evidence to support her assertion by stating that the child has done ‘exactly the same thing’ in a previous school.

Whilst the two responses of T3 during the mother’s explanation (lines 1957 & 1961) seem to indicate an acceptance of the suggested cause, T1 joins the discussion (lines 1962-4) and suggests an alternative explanation that centres around the routines in the previous education provision (The Nook) that the child attended prior to re-entering mainstream school and the frequent provision of snacks. T1’s turn begins with ‘yeah but’ signalling her disaffiliation with the parents’ explanation (Pomerantz, 1984). In line 1965 T3 agrees with T1 adding strength to the explanation that T1 has formulated. Unlike the mother in Extract 5.3, the parents in this conference do not continue to produce excuses and justifications following the rejection of their explanation. This is perhaps because the version constructed by T1 is a situational explanation which moves the location of the problem away from the child but also does not allocate responsibility to the parents. Therefore, the parents do not need to try to reject an attribution of responsibility. Instead, the father agrees with this explanation (line 1968), claiming definitively that this explains the child’s complaints of hunger: ‘that’s what it is yeah’. T1’s so-prefaced formulation in line 1969 summarises the gist of the previous interaction (Antaki *et al.*, 2005), explaining that the child would have had breakfast at home and then a second breakfast at The Nook (lines 1969, 1971-2, 1974-5). T1 then draws on personal experience to normalise the child’s feelings of hunger (lines 1976-7, 1979) by stating that she would be feeling the same as the child if she had become used to having two

breakfasts and then had to get used to having only one breakfast, further strengthening the explanation.

The interaction continues with further agreement from T3, the father and the health visitor. T2 joins the discussion and, along with T1, restates the centrality of snacks within The Nook's nurturing approach and that the child will have become used to this (lines 1985-91). This adds further weight to this particular explanation with two teachers both stressing the importance of the nurturing approach in The Nook.

Whilst the teachers have previously only mentioned toast and other more general snacks, the mother provides more details of the types of snacks the child was provided with at The Nook (lines 1993-4). Breakfast waffles with chocolate spread on them is an unusual and desirable snack compared to ubiquitous toast and therefore is likely to be particularly missed by the child. Here the mother continues the parents' endorsement of the explanation provided by T1.

Several different explanations for why the child might be feeling hungry are proposed, both implicitly and explicitly, in this section of talk. These explanations position the child, the parents and other influencing factors in different ways depending on the explanation and also depending on who puts forward the explanation. The accepted explanation contests the parents' suggestion that the child is the source of the problem and identifies the cause of the problem as situational so neither the parents or the child are culpable. The development of this explanation, in contrast to the parents' explanation, is underpinned by a child-focused ideal about children requiring care and protection rather than being the subject of blame. Consequently, the type of explanation and the underpinning ideals are central when the (in)validity of explanations is determined interactionally. Explanations that are child-focused are much more likely to be interactionally accepted.

This extract particularly illustrates how explanations are negotiated as the interaction proceeds. Yet, not all interactants are equally able to propose versions of events, actions and people and get these validated interactionally with professional versions dominating. In contrast to some of the other extracts (5.3, 5.4), in this extract the parents explicitly agree with the dominant professional version and provide further information to support its development and validation (cf. Extract 5.1). Therefore,

the parents have a role in the negotiation of the dominant explanation but as supporters rather than being able to propose an explanation that gets support. Consequently, their participation is shallow. The interactional negotiation of an acceptable explanation or version also involves the negotiation of the ideals that underpin that explanation or version. Therefore, when versions are negotiated as dominant, the ideals about children and parenting on which the version is predicated have been negotiated as acceptable and valid. This was a common pattern identified in the data. In this extract, which is representative of this pattern, the parents' participation is limited because they do not mobilise relevant ideals and their explanations are not accepted, in contrast to professionals whose explanations are accepted and who accomplish effective participation.

The last extract in this section is also illustrative of the importance of relevant ideals to securing dominant versions and also effective participation. It involves a discussion between the chair, the social worker (SW) and the mother about levels of tidiness and cleanliness in the home. This extract provides an example of a professional, the chair, mobilising relevant ideals in a particularly persuasive and explicit way in order to reject the mother's description of the situation. The chair manages the floor to elicit the differing views of the mother and the social worker which are used as context for moves which focus on the impact of the child and problematise the mother's view. Consequently, the mother's participation is shallow because her perspective on the situation is explicitly rejected. This is accomplished through the mobilisation of relevant ideals by the chair who accomplishes effective participation.

Extract 5.6

CPC3

2342 CH But what poor home conditions are we talking about
 2343 then if if that does you- you [()
 2344 M [just like mess it's
 2345 kids' mess I call it
 2346 CH okay
 2347 M [I got six kids my house is never gonna be clean
 2348 CH [from- from s::ocial care's perspective because
 2349 we've talked about your erm (.) threshold if you
 2350 like that level so that level up there is about what
 2351 you just mentioned ((laugh)) erm about pee and and
 2352 poo erm [but () different
 2353 M [you know bad smells and stuff like that

2354 [to me is a dirty house
 2355 CH [okay
 2356 CH Okay so what were social care's (.) [concern level
 2357 M [er clo- as-
 2358 CH of concern I just wanna hear from social care what
 2359 that w- (.) was and if we still need to look at the
 2360 house in regards to that bit of concern
 2361 SW i- it's [difficult to report yeah I mean obviously
 2362 CH [() about it
 2363 SW when we completed the chronology it w- the the
 2364 wording that was used is is regularly used is poor
 2365 so to un- because I wasn't the allocated worker so
 2366 no-
 2367 [I'm unable to decipher what that means
 2368 CH [yeah that that's not helpful really
 2369 SW [for somebody else
 2370 CH [yeah
 2371 SW And that's why I wanted to have those conversation
 2372 with Julie I suppose (.) from my perspective what
 2373 they were trying to explain that it was general kind
 2374 of untidiness erm you know probably a general level
 2375 of er the sides not being cleared erm beds not be-
 2376 er beds has been an ongoing thing actually which I
 2377 have seen that the children haven't had bedding or
 2378 the beds haven't been made to a to a standard you
 2379 know so those kind of [things really
 2380 CH [right
 2381 SW
 2382 M ()
 2383 SW I suppose er relation to the reason why we had the
 2384 referral in probably similar concerns to what
 2385 ((housing charity worker)) had reported on his visit
 2386 (.) yeah
 2387 CH Okay so it doesn't need to be
 2388 [at that level that you mentioned okay
 2389 M [no I know it doesn't need to be but I mean
 2390 CH But what perhaps like ((social worker))'s just
 2391 explained that that (.) those [sorts of conditions
 2392 M [yeah
 2393 CH would have an impact on [on children
 2394 M [yeah course
 2395 CH Erm and not just physically not just (.) not being
 2396 able to get into a bed straight away or having to
 2397 get on into a bed where there's perhaps no erm sheet
 2398 on the bed
 2399 M yeah
 2400 CH It's a about er sort of feeling proud I think erm
 2401 sometimes about you- your environment it's about erm
 2402 feeling confident that if somebody popped round you
 2403 know one of their mates had popped round they could
 2404 say mind the mess there but come into my bedroom and
 2405 that's [() want it d'you know what I mean
 2406 M [yeah ye yeah no yeah

In the first half of this extract the chair enacts authority to manage the floor to invite contributions from both the mother and the social worker. The mother is offered the floor and given the opportunity to comment on the levels of tidiness in the home (lines 2342-3) which she minimises and describes as ‘just like mess it’s kids’ mess I call it’ (lines 2344-5). She presents the situation as unproblematic and cites the number of children in the house as an explanatory factor (line 2347). The chair then refers to what the mother has previously stated (prior to this extract) about what she thinks generally are concerning levels of household dirt and mess (lines 2348-52). The chair enacts authority and allocates the floor to the social worker to provide more information. By inviting the social worker to comment on the concerns about the conditions in the home the chair is rejecting the mother’s construction of the state of the house as ‘just ... kids’ mess’. The social worker has trouble initially in describing the historical concerns because she was not involved with the family at the time, but then gives her own perspective. She provides some detail about ‘the sides not being cleared’ (line 2375) and the beds not being made (lines 2375-8).

By eliciting the views of the mother and the social worker, the chair ascertains their differing positions. The mother only views significantly dirty homes as problematic. In contrast, the social worker’s observations of the home suggest that less ‘extreme’ issues in the house are considered to be of concern. The chair then uses these two differing positions to attempt to explain to the mother why conditions in the home that are not as acute as the ones the mother outlines might, nonetheless, be problematic (lines 2387-93). In order to do this, she talks about the impact on the children of the issues that the social worker just described (lines 2391-93). The chair illustrates her point by talking about children more generally rather than the mother’s children specifically. She suggests that it is not just the physical impact of being able to get into a made-up bed straight away but that children want to feel confident to be able to invite their friends round to their house and up to their room and lacking a made-up bed may impact on that (lines 2395-2404). The poor home conditions are problematised as having an impact on the children’s ability to invite friends to their home. The chair’s explicit mobilisation of relevant ideals about children and their needs (physical, social and psychological) to secure an interactionally accepted version is evident.

As well as the mother's perspective being discounted, her limited participation is also apparent in her responses during the chair's turns which contrast the views of the mother and the social worker's observations and discuss the potential impact on children. The mother predominantly agrees with the chair (lines 2392, 2394, 2399, 2406) except for an attempt to provide a contrasting view, signalled by 'but' (Schiffrin, 1987), which is not completed. However, not agreeing with the chair would have been particularly challenging. It would have meant that the mother would have had to explicitly disagree with the chair's assessment of the impact of the home conditions on the children and consequently challenge the underpinning ideals. Therefore, we can see how the mobilisation of relevant ideals is particularly significant with regard to securing dominant versions and also effective participation.

The excerpts presented in this section are representative of the prevailing pattern identified in the data whereby parents' participation was shallow or representative of their presence. This was because they had limited authority to manage the floor and their attempts to negotiate authority were ineffective. Consequently, their ability to make contributions whenever they liked and on whatever topic they liked was restricted. Additionally, the versions of events, actions or people that they were able to contribute within these constraints were not interactionally accepted, that is because the content of their contributions was not acknowledged or they were explicitly rejected. Also contributing to the lack of uptake of parents' versions was that they did not embody dominant ideals about children and parenting, resulting in parents' limited participation. These findings confirm previous research that has shown that the participation of parents in child protection conferences and other similar meetings between parents and professionals is constrained (Broadhurst *et al.*, 2012; Hall & Slembrouck, 2001; Koprowska, 2016). It also confirms interview-based studies (Corby *et al.*, 1996; Smithson & Gibson, 2017; Thoburn *et al.*, 1995) that have found that parents feel that their perspectives are marginalised in child protection conferences by identifying how this occurs interactionally. What is important in my findings is how parents' shallow participation is intimately connected to professionals' successful accomplishment of participation. In successfully enacting authority, professionals limited parents' participation in terms of their access to the floor. Parents' versions of events, actions or people were not

interactionally accepted as a direct result of professionals enacting authority to validate or otherwise the versions of others. Moreover, the enacted authority of professionals was also used to secure the dominance of their own versions (see also Hjörne, 2005; Mehan, 1983). This supports the argument of Hofstede and colleagues (2001) that in meetings between professionals and parents both professionals and parents can orientate to facilitating or restricting participation and can influence the participation of others.

Parents accomplishing effective participation

This section presents two extracts that illustrate how parents were able to accomplish effective participation in some instances, an important but less prominent pattern that was identified across the three child protection conferences. This kind of participation in the interaction contrasts with the participation of parents that is representative of presence identified in the previous section. When parents accomplish effective participation, they claim and are granted authority to contribute to the ongoing discussion with information that is taken up and built upon in the subsequent interaction. The extracts in this section are representative of this pattern. In the data, the mobilisation of relevant ideals about children and parenting was significant in parents' accomplishment of effective participation and the extracts in this section are illustrative of this pattern. The contributions of the parents in these extracts are interactionally accepted because they produce or provide support for examples of parents fulfilling their responsibilities and the children's needs being met. This more successful participation by parents is a collective endeavour because other interactants in the conference have to endorse the parents' contributions.

The first extract in this section concerns the health visitor's account of a developmental check she carried out on a young child. This extract illustrates how parents claim and are granted epistemic authority in their contributions to the interaction and how their contributions are validated through interactional acceptance by other interactants. It also demonstrates how the parents affiliate with the health visitor and validate her contributions. The indexing of relevant ideals is more subtle in this extract. Both the health visitor and the parents orient to producing

an account in which the children's needs are being met and the parents are fulfilling their parenting responsibilities.

Extract 5.7

CPC1

2182 HV No he's not he's- he's absolutely fine his erm
2183 development's I did a pre one year check on him in
2184 October and his development's age appropriate he's
2185 he's into everything [but he's a normal (.) growing
2186 F [oh god yeah tell me about it
2187 HV baby there's never been any concerns around his er
2188 health or development erm what more can I say↑
2189 really that's it he-
2190 he had his erm immunisations [in October didn't he
2191 F [() it's all up
2192 to date it's all done yeah
2193 HV Yeah that- so he's all up to date with his
2194 immunisations and yeah I mean all through really
2195 since he was born you've always always engaged with
2196 me haven't you and let same as ((social worker)) you
2197 know I've I've never a problem even if I turn- I
2198 don't usually turn up without you knowing but at
2199 [times it's happened and
2200 F [yeah
2201 M [() I forget
2202 HV Yeah or sometimes you might forget but you still ask
2203 me in but erm yeah and good good bond with both
2204 parents with Lincoln he was playing row the boat
2205 with you [at that visit
2206 M [he likes row the boat
2207 HV and laughing away and so he's doing really well and
2208 I think the groups is a great thing for [both of you
2209 SW [umm
2210 HV as well so continue with that it'll be good for his
2211 social skills and his development and everything
2212 that's it [really yeah
2213 CH [right excellent

The health visitor describes her professional assessment of the child as being 'a normal (.) growing baby' (lines 2185-7), that is meeting measurable developmental expectations. She also references his past development and states that there have 'never been any concerns' (lines 2187-8). The health visitor specifies that the child had some immunisations in November and the father secures the floor after some overlap to agree with the health visitor and validate her statement (lines 2191-2). The father's contribution to the discussion is validated by the health visitor's next contribution as she echoes the father's words 'all up to date' and reaffirms that the child has no outstanding immunisations.

After speaking about the child's development, the health visitor changes topic to talking about how well the parents have engaged with her (lines 2194-99). She starts to talk about how the parents have always let her in the house, even if she comes for a visit when the parents are not expecting her which has happened occasionally. The parents seek to secure the floor and the mother provides additional information to supplement the health visitor's account. She explains that the family might not be expecting the health visitor's visit because the mother has forgotten about it (line 2201). The health visitor's next turn validates the mother's contribution by repeating that the mother might sometimes forget about appointments and adding that the parents still let her in even if this is the case (lines 2202-3).

The health visitor moves on to talk about the child's bond with the parents. She describes her observation of the child playing row the boat with one of the parents at a recent visit (lines 2203-5). The mother confirms the health visitor's description and contributes further information about the child's feelings about this game: 'he likes row the boat' (line 2206). The health visitor takes up and ratifies the mother's evaluation, describing the child's response to the game: 'laughing away' (line 2207). Throughout this extract, the parents' contributions are taken up and validated by the health visitor, often through repetition of parts of their turns. The parents enact authority by providing additional information that supplements the health visitor's account and their turns also operate to demonstrate their acceptance of the health visitor's descriptions. This extract is therefore illustrative of the pattern identified in the data in which parents claim and are granted authority to contribute to the ongoing discussion and their contributions are interactionally validated.

The indexing of ideals is not as discernible in this extract as some of the extracts discussed earlier, but the health visitor's positive talk about the development check includes tacit references to the child having his needs met and consequently the parents fulfilling their role responsibilities. The health visitor therefore is constructing a description of the child and family which subtly draws on concepts about children's needs and about parenting which serves to authorise her dominant version. The parents' contributions also support these kinds of ideals and therefore are interactionally accepted. Through successfully claiming authority in their

contributions to the interaction and through supporting the health visitor's mobilisation of relevant ideals, the parents' participation can be deemed effective because their contributions are interactionally validated and their affiliation with the health visitor and validation of her contributions is also accepted.

The second extract in this section occurs towards the beginning of the child protection conference where the progress of the children is being discussed. The social worker is talking about the mother undertaking academic work at home with the children and the mother contributes to the discussion. In this extract the mother is able to enact authority and contribute additional information to the discussion which is interactionally accepted. She is also able to successfully counter the way that the chair positions her by constructing an alternative description of her actions which is interactionally accepted. This extract also illustrates the connection between mobilising relevant ideals about children and parenting and effective participation. (U = uncle of children, mother's brother).

Extract 5.8

CPC3

514 SW And I think following the core group last time we
 515 identified that Connor would probably need a little
 516 bit more help than the girls would- [would have
 517 LS [yeah
 518 SW needed Julie assured the core group that she was
 519 doing some work at home with Connor
 520 M And I showed you them [books that I got didn't I
 521 SW [and then when I went home
 522 Julie was able to show me the work that she's done
 523 with Connor (.) so that's quite positive that she's
 524 actually doing the work with the [children
 525 CH [okay is [that what
 526 M [yeah
 527 CH you want up as working well then
 528 SW Yeah yeah
 529 CH So:: er Julie's supporting
 530 SW Connor's learning at home yeah well all and Sophie's
 531 [wasn't you yeah
 532 M [yeah a- a- and Madison's
 533 SW All of the children's yeah (.) learning at home
 534 CH And you are now able to do that because you feel
 535 [()
 536 M [no it's not I've I've always bought em the little
 537 erm (.) you know the little m- the little workbooks
 538 that you get in Wilkos and (.) but erm obviously
 539 Sophie needs a bit oomph on her spellings so she's
 540 got her SATs so I or- well David ordered some erm

541 (.)what they called
 542 U Erm (.) [it's key stage two
 543 M [they're called grammar key key stage two I
 544 th- [it's off the internet you know s- loads of
 545 ? [oh okay
 546 M workbooks so I sit and do them with them
 547 CH Right okay
 548 M Yeah so I showed I showed ((social worker))
 549 obviously the work what I've been doing for them and
 550 then I tick em and give em a like a little sticker

In this discussion about the educational support the mother is providing for the children, the mother enacts authority and contributes further information which is interactionally accepted. The social worker raises the need for Connor to have some additional support and identifies that the mother reports that she is 'doing some work at home with Connor' (lines 518-9). The mother responds to the reported nature of the social worker's turn, seeking confirmation that she had shown the social worker examples of the work (line 520). She is asking the social worker to evidence her actions and the social worker does so in the next turn, confirming that she has seen some of the work and evaluating the mother's actions as positive (lines 521-524). The mother provides additional information about the books that she got thus enacting authority to provide this relevant information which is validated through the social worker's take up and rephrasing of this information. The information provided by the mother is interactionally accepted and built upon by the social worker. This happens a second time in the extract. In lines 525-31, the chair and the social worker begin developing a form of wording so that this positive action can be included on the computer screen that is available for all meeting participants to view during the meeting. The proposed wording initially identifies Connor as receiving support at home, but then the social worker extends this to include another child and asks for confirmation from the mother. The mother provides this and names another one of her children that she is supporting at home (line 532). The social worker accepts the mother's inclusion of another child and states that the wording should be that the mother is supporting 'all of the children's' learning at home (line 533). Therefore, this expansion by the mother to include more of her children that she is supporting is interactionally accepted by the social worker and taken up to be included in the wording on the screen.

Through her question in line 534 the chair wants to discover why the mother is able to provide this support now (when it was not being provided before). The mother rejects the supposition that she did not provide this kind of support at home before. Using an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986), she states that this is not new behaviour this is something that she has done consistently over time (lines 536-541). The mother is positioning herself as someone who consistently fulfils her parenting obligations rather than someone who only takes action when there is child protection intervention. The mother enacts her epistemic authority, recruiting support from her brother, and provides more specific details about the actions she has taken and Sophie's specific needs in relation to her upcoming SATs. The chair's turn in line 547 indicates acceptance of the information provided by the mother and of her self-positioning although the mother goes on to summarise what she has been doing, drawing on support from the social worker (lines 548-50). The mother is able to construct an alternative positioning for herself which contrasts with the one proposed by the chair in line 534. This is interactionally accepted, as is the mother's authority to contribute additional information to the discussion.

This extract demonstrates the mother's accomplishment of effective participation through her successful enactment of authority to provide further information and display her epistemic status. Her contributions are interactionally accepted and built upon by others in the interaction, representing the pattern identified in the wider dataset. The mother's contributions accord with understandings of acceptable parenting standards in which parents fulfil their role responsibilities and children's needs are met. This illustrates how the mobilisation of relevant ideals is key to accomplishing effective participation and an accepted version of events, actions or people.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have examined the nature and extent of interactants' participation in the child protection conferences convened because of concerns about neglect. This exploration has employed a conceptualisation of participation that focuses on whether interactants are given or can claim the right to speak. More crucially the conceptualisation focuses on the consequentiality of participants' contributions, that

is whether they are taken up by others, accepted or validated. I have shown through the sequential analysis how interactants' participation is not pre-determined, rather it is pursued and negotiated in and through interaction. The model proposed in this chapter locates the negotiation of authority and the mobilisation of relevant ideals as central to realising effective participation.

However, there is variation in the extent to which participation can be effectively accomplished by different participants and I specifically contrast presence with participation in the analysis of parental contributions to the interaction. The principle of partnership with parents underpins the Children Act 1989 and associated policy and guidance and continues to be emphasised today. Despite this, the analysis has demonstrated that, quite simply, the presence of parents at child protection conferences does not result in them having equal or effective participation in the interaction. Through analysis of the sequential organisation of the talk I have demonstrated that parents' participation is predominantly shallow and is indicative of presence rather than their participation in the meeting. As participation is directly related to involvement in decision-making, consequently I argue that parents' involvement in decision-making was limited because their participation was unlikely to be consequential. This is because they are less likely to successfully enact authority and to mobilise relevant ideals in order to get their versions interactionally accepted. Parents had limited control over the management of the floor and their attempts to secure the floor and control the interaction were not always successful. Their versions of events, actions or people, which often took the form of excuses or justifications, were less likely to be interactionally accepted. Contributing to the lack of acceptance of parents' versions was the fact that they were less likely to incorporate acceptable ways of positioning children and families' problems and so did not mobilise relevant ideals. Additionally, when parents attempted to put forward their own version of how they see things they often had to work against dominant ideals which problematise parenting and frequently fail to take account of the structural factors that impact on families (see Chapter 1). Bureaucratic and institutional discourses render particular actions as acceptable and discount those that are not (Sarangi & Slembrouck, 1996). Consequently, parents' versions which do not fit the dominant ideals or index what the system recognises as acceptable are ineffectual.

However, whilst parents' participation was predominantly shallow, the analysis also demonstrated that parents' effective participation was also possible within the same meeting event. In the data there were instances of parents enacting authority. On these occasions they were acknowledged as competent holders of knowledge and their contributions were validated and taken up in the subsequent interaction. When parents' versions were accepted, they indexed accepted understandings of children and parents. This illustrates the centrality of the underpinning ideals to effective participation (see also Corby *et al.*, 1996) and to the interactional acceptance of versions of events, actions or people. Interestingly, there appears to be a connection between the topic and the possibilities for parents to accomplish effective participation. Instances where parents' participation was effective were more likely to occur when the discussion was focused on the positive actions that the parents had taken. When talk is focused on what is going well, the possibilities for parents to be able enact authority and to index relevant ideals in their contributions increases and therefore their versions are more likely to be accepted. This is an important contribution of this research and has not been identified previously.

In contrast to parents, professionals' participation was much more effective and influential. Professionals enacted authority through strategies for managing the floor, through setting the agenda and through the use of summarising and formulating to regulate information. This enactment of authority limited parents' participation. Professionals had a significant role in validating or rejecting other speakers' versions (predominantly parents'). Their versions of events, actions or people dominated, often because they mobilised relevant ideals about social work with children and families. Moreover, as participation is directly related to decision-making, professionals' involvement in decision-making was extensive because their participation was predominantly effective.

Of significance to the interactional negotiation of participation is the connection between parents' participation and professionals' participation. Parents' participation was limited through the professionals' accomplishment of effective participation. Through the enactment of authority, professionals enact their institutional roles and the associated role expectations and entitlements which exist beyond the immediate

interactional event. This also demonstrates how enacting authority and mobilising relevant ideals can be used to claim positions of power. The shallow participation of parents and the dominance of professional versions and authority indicates how the power relationships (between ‘client’ and professional) that pre-exist the interactional event become relevant and are brought to the fore in the child protection conference. The asymmetry between the parents and the professionals is re-enacted through the interactional event of the child protection conference, suggesting that the social work commitment to anti-oppressive practice becomes attenuated in these meetings. This is discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

Chapter 6: Discussion

This research is located within a political, social, economic and policy context where the focus has shifted to authoritarian intervention and holding parents responsible when there are concerns about the care of children. There has also been a concomitant marginalisation of approaches that support and empower families to make changes aided by appropriate support services (Featherstone *et al.*, 2018; Featherstone *et al.*, 2014b; Parton, 2014; Parton & Williams, 2017) (see Chapter 1). This thesis has sought to examine how these broader approaches to working with children, parents and families which embody values and conceptualisations regarding the rights, roles and responsibilities of children, parents, families and the state are connected to the approaches to working with children, parents and families that are constructed in and through interaction, specifically in relation to child neglect. As has been demonstrated, a focus on child neglect is pertinent because, in a socio-political context which increasingly responsabilises parents, issues of parental culpability are more problematic due to links between neglect, poverty and social deprivation and when the gendered nature of neglect is considered (see Chapter 1). Drawing on social constructionism and using an analytical approach based on interactional sociolinguistics (Chapter 3), this study has explored how social workers, in accounts of their practice obtained through interviews and focus groups, construct and negotiate the ideals of social work with children and families in relation to child neglect and how they position children, parents and social workers within these ideals (Chapter 4). It has also examined how parents and professionals participate in child protection conferences that involve concerns about neglect and how they position themselves and are positioned by others in these meetings. This has been achieved through an analysis of audio recordings of these meetings that considers the nature and extent of parents' and professionals' participation in the interaction (Chapter 5).

Synthesising the key findings presented in the previous two chapters, this chapter considers the ways in which these findings respond to the research questions posed at the outset. It also highlights how they extend existing knowledge, theory and research. First, I discuss the findings, considering the research questions in turn,

beginning with the negotiation of the ideals of social work with children and families in relation to child neglect. Next, I consider how different parties participate in child protection conferences that involve concerns about child neglect and consider how participation connects with how the different parties are positioned. Lastly, this chapter explores how the findings address the overarching aim of the research. It considers how the institutional order regarding the way that children, parents, families and their problems are understood and responded to is (re)produced in and through interaction, in the context of the complexity of child neglect.

The ideals of social work with children and families and the positioning of children, parents and social workers

This thesis has explored the approaches to working with children, parents and families that are constructed in and through interaction, in relation to child neglect, through the analysis of social workers' accounts of their practice obtained through interviews and focus groups (Chapter 4). The thematic analysis of social workers' accounts of practice in relation to neglect identified four cross-cutting ideals of social work with children and families that were constructed and negotiated in and through interaction. These were protection from (risk of) harm, keeping children within their families, working in partnership with families and the appropriateness of the intervention to the circumstances. These ideals embodied particular ways of positioning children, parents and the state in the context of the complexity of neglect.

The ideals identified in my research were broadly similar to discourses and themes identified in previous studies undertaken in relation to child protection and other aspects of children and families social work including children with disabilities (Hall *et al.*, 1997; Keddell, 2013; Keddell, 2015; Whitaker, 2014; White, 2003), but the identification of the ideal of intervention as appropriate and necessary extends previous research as it has not been identified in other studies. The emphasis on the tailoring of intervention to individual children and families' needs within this ideal adds further breadth to previous research, reinforcing the multiplicity of positions and values available to social workers to construct their professional roles which is suggested in previous research that identifies both child protection and family support discourses in accounts of practice (Broadhurst, 2012; Hall & Slembrouck,

2011; Kedde1, 2013). Additionally, my research specifically focused on child neglect, something that had not been done in previous studies that have identified discourses and themes relating to child protection and children and families social work. Consequently, this thesis contributes a greater understanding of how social workers talk about neglect in their accounts of practice. Talking about neglect is *doing* professional practice in line with the position taken here. As such, I show how neglect is constructed and achieved in the situated encounters.

What is significant about my findings and is a key contribution is that it explores how social workers navigate any tensions and contradictions between these co-existing ideals. It details how one particular ideal, and consequently a particular way of understanding the settlement between the state and the family, is preferenced interactionally. These tensions and contradictions are particularly relevant in the contentious area of neglect because of issues of parental responsibility and the impact of diverse forms of adversity on families and family members (see Chapter 1). Whilst other studies have identified the possibility of multiple discourses in social work talk (Broadhurst, 2012; Hall & Slembrouck, 2011), they have not analysed how competing discourses are negotiated and the mechanisms through which this takes place interactionally. This is where my research makes a contribution because it has specifically shown how contending ideals are navigated interactionally, demonstrating how there was a consistency or regularity in the ordering of ideals. My analysis has highlighted how the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm, and consequently a particular way of positioning children, parents and social workers, dominated within social workers' accounts, showing how this is accomplished interactionally (see Figure 2, Chapter 4). This ideal was generally prioritised over other ideals when more than one ideal or perspective was being talked about. For example, the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm was identified as taking precedence over good engagement from the parents in decision making about whether a neglect situation is severe enough to require child protection intervention. It was also prioritised in discussions about court decision making when delay in courts making decisions about removing children is problematised. The dominance of the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm was also evident when it was used to legitimise exceptions to keeping children within their families because children were not protected from harm. This meant that the ideal of keeping

children within their families was only upheld when it did not conflict with the dominant ideal. This ideal was also used as a resource to construct the legitimacy of the ideal of intervention that is appropriate and necessary, further illustrating its dominance. As a consequence of the dominance of the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm, other contrasting perspectives including a family support approach are acknowledged in the talk but, nonetheless, become marginalised. Interestingly, this also reveals how the social work commitment to anti-oppressive practices is attenuated in the interactional process of navigating tensions and contradictions between ideals.

What this ordering of the ideals in interaction shows is that the negotiation of ideals is locally constituted. However, whilst meaning is negotiated locally, the wider context is also relevant (Angouri, 2018). What counts as a legitimate professional ideal is dependent on the available discourses associated with the institutional order (Drew & Heritage, 1992a). The dominance of the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm at the micro-level reflects the wider context of the child welfare system in which a child protection approach dominates and family support approaches are marginalised along with a lack of attention to considerations of adversity. The dominance of the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm means that the concept of risk is elevated which is reflected in the risk averse practice cultures that permeate contemporary child protection practice (Featherstone *et al.*, 2018; Morris *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, through their talk in the interviews and focus groups the social workers (re)produce and maintain the institutional reality (Sarangi & Roberts, 1999), illustrating how institutional talk shapes and is shaped by the institutional context (Boden, 1994). Interestingly, the dominant ideal was not resisted in contrast to other studies (Broadhurst, 2012; Kedde, 2011). For example, in Broadhurst's analysis of social work talk from several studies of local authority children's services she found that, in descriptions of their work, there were examples of professionals resisting the dominant discourse of child protection with 'small stories of family support' (Broadhurst, 2012, pg. 294).

This ordering of ideals and the dominance of the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm in social workers' talk also reifies dominant ways of understanding children, parents and the role of the state encompassed within the current orientation

towards child protection. Consequently, the accounts produced by social workers in interaction (re)produce and reinforce the broader institutional order. Prioritising the ideal of protecting children from (risk of) harm means that children are positioned as being vulnerable and at risk. This serves to dissociate their needs from the broader family context and/or social and economic factors that are recognised as impacting on families. Parents are positioned as posing a risk and as responsible for any deficits in care; in my data there was a particular emphasis on responsabilising parents in relation to concerns about neglect with minimal mitigation of blame, in contrast to other studies (Hall *et al.*, 1999; Hall & Slembrouck, 2011; Keddell, 2015; White, 2003) (see Chapter 1). As a result, social and structural factors that impact on parents were laundered out of social workers' accounts of practice and social workers and the state were positioned as being obligated to take action to protect children when the parental duty to care for children was not met. The implications of positioning parents in this way are considerable. Lack of attention to social and structural factors means that the impact of adversity on families, particularly in relation to neglect, and the impact of intersecting oppressions on women, minority ethnic groups and those with disabilities is under acknowledged (MacInnes *et al.*, 2014; Platt, 2009; Stone *et al.*, 2019). This conflicts with the social work commitment to anti-oppressive practice and social justice. In the context of links between neglect, poverty and social deprivation, issues of parental culpability are more problematic (see Chapter 1). Moreover, the responsabilisation of parents falls heavily on women's shoulders as it is predominantly mothers who are identified as culpable and who are subject to intense scrutiny (see Chapter 1). The current focus on forms of early intervention which draw heavily on child development theories, particularly (a renaissance of) attachment theory, and neuroscience also reinforces the notion that caring work is the realm of mothers who are the inevitable targets of intervention (Edwards *et al.*, 2015) (see Chapter 1).

Participation in child protection conferences

This thesis has also explored the approaches to working with children, parents and families that are constructed in and through interaction, in relation to child neglect, through the analysis of attendees' participation in child protection conferences that involved concerns about neglect (Chapter 5). The findings show how parents and

professionals participate in different ways in these meetings and I connect this analysis of the micro-level interaction in child protection conferences with wider policies and practices in relation to child protection.

A key contribution of this research is that it provides a new model that extends our understanding of participation in child protection conferences. The findings extend linguistic conceptualisations of participation by proposing a way of considering participation that brings together the management of the floor, the shaping of the interaction through turns at talk and the uptake of these turns, that is whether they are taken up by others, accepted or validated (see Chapter 2). Drawing on this conceptualisation of participation, the model developed in this thesis and presented in Chapter 5 demonstrates that a person's presence at a meeting is insufficient to facilitate their equal, or even any, participation. Instead, participation is negotiated interactionally. Through proposing a model which juxtaposes presence with participation I have been able to problematise presence in meetings which is conceptualised by the system as participation. Involving parents in child protection conferences is seen as one way in which partnership working can be realised, a principle which is a core part of the Children Act 1989, and its accompanying guidance, and the value base of social work. Procedures and practices (HM Government, 2018) for involving parents in these meetings make an assumption that presence means participation, but my findings demonstrate that their presence at these meetings does not result in their effective participation. Indeed, parents' participation can be characterised as shallow because, despite the efforts they made, they were predominantly unsuccessful in negotiating authority and mobilising relevant ideals about children and parenting. In contrast, professionals' participation was more meaningful and effective because they were able to successfully enact authority in the interaction. They were also able to successfully mobilise relevant ideals about children and parenting related to their professional roles and responsibilities.

These findings extend social work understandings of parental participation by illustrating in further detail the asymmetrical organisation of interaction and participation in child protection conferences (and similar meetings) identified in previous studies (Broadhurst *et al.*, 2012; Hall *et al.*, 1999; Hall & Slembrouck,

2001; Hitzler & Messmer, 2010; Koprowska, 2016). My findings also add to previous conceptualisations of participation by proposing the concepts of effective and shallow participation as a way of understanding the extent of interactants' participation. Shallow participation is particularly useful for conceptualising the marginalisation of parents as contributors to child protection conferences which renders them not competent to represent their children's interests in comparison to professionals.

The model proposed in this thesis also extends previous interactional research because it explicitly foregrounds and theorises the connection between participation and involvement in decision making. I argue that parents' involvement in decision making in child protection conferences is limited because their participation was less likely to be consequential. Additionally, parents' versions of events, actions and people were rarely in line with what is recognisable by the system (Sarangi & Slembrouck, 1996). Because professionals were able to accomplish effective participation, consequently their involvement in decision making within the child protection conference was more extensive. The findings also show how professionals, in contrast to parents, had a significant role in controlling what information was emphasised as relevant in relation to parenting and the impact of neglect on children. As a result, they had a greater influence on the processes that are involved in decision making. This was evident in the differential use of interactional resources by parents and professionals in their attempts to negotiate their participation. Professionals used discursive strategies such as mobilising dominant ideals about children and parenting which secured the acceptance and validation of their versions and made them more difficult to challenge by parents. They also used formulating and summarising to regulate information. In contrast, parents were less likely to mobilise dominant ideals to support their versions and they frequently responded to attributions of responsibility with accounts that took the form of excuses and justifications (see Chapter 5). As a result, in the ongoing negotiation of what constitutes (un)acceptable parenting, their versions were less likely to be interactionally accepted. Parents were also more likely to disregard normative interactional conventions in order to attempt to enact control, for example they interrupted and produced dispreferred responses, but these were broadly ineffective in securing the acceptance of their contributions. Consequently, professionals,

through their use of institutionally recognisable resources, were dominant in determining what was emphasised as relevant in the ongoing construction of the concerns about neglect. Additionally, because of how they contribute to the lack of interactional acceptance of parents' contributions, professionals were able to determine what was disregarded such as the contexts of parents' day-to-day lives which often formed the basis of their contributions. Thus, through regulating information, professionals were able to enact positions of power. This control of information by professionals is unlikely to have occurred only during this single (but pivotal) event. Commensurate with a social constructionist approach, the construction of meaning will have been an ongoing process during the whole of the child protection process, and during retellings. It is likely that this regulation of information by professionals occurs at other points such as during the previous section 47 enquires and assessment (Children Act 1989) and other contacts with the family (see also Hall, 1997; White, 1997).

The focus of previous studies (such as Broadhurst *et al.*, 2012; Hall *et al.*, 1999; Hall & Slembrouck, 2001; Hitzler & Messmer, 2010; Koprowska, 2016) has been asymmetric interaction between professionals and families. However, there has been little consideration of how parents might influence the interaction, enact authority and accomplish meaningful participation. The findings of this study address this gap and extend previous research. They do this by showing that, despite their participation being predominantly shallow, parents were sometimes also able to enact authority and get their versions accepted when participating in child protection conferences and the mechanisms through which this is accomplished and facilitated. For example, they were able to claim, and were granted, authority to produce valid contributions and versions that were taken up and built upon in the interaction subsequently. This was more likely to occur when the topic was the parents' positive actions or what was going well (Extracts 5.7 and 5.8). Therefore, there was a connection between the topic and the likelihood of parents' effective participation; when the topic was the parents' positive actions or what was going well, parents' participation was more likely to be effective. This suggests that there are certain topics, such as the positive steps that have been achieved, where parents are more likely to be able to accomplish effective participation because it is more readily facilitated by professionals. In other areas, perhaps those more critical to assessing

and understanding the risk of significant harm to children, this was less likely to happen.

Whilst there were some instances when parents were able to accomplish effective participation, overall, they were predominantly positioned as marginal participants. This was in contrast to professionals who enacted power through their more influential participation, including their control of the floor, and their greater involvement in decision making processes through the control and regulation of information. Thus, the analysis revealed the power relationships that were constructed in the interaction. The findings show that the asymmetrical power relationships between the parents and professionals that pre-exist the interactional event become relevant and are brought to the fore in the child protection conference. Consequently, this research makes a contribution by providing a greater understanding of how power operates in child protection conferences and of the relationship between power and (non-) participation.

This research connects the micro-level interaction in child protection conferences to wider policies and practices in relation to child protection and social work, extending the social work research base. For example, the findings of this study raise questions about whether parents are fully participating in child protection conferences when the core social work values of social justice, empowerment, self-determination and the promotion of individual rights are considered (BASW, 2012). This suggests that their involvement is tokenistic and representative of mere presence whilst under the façade of participation. It is evident that, within this particular event, working in partnership with parents in terms of valuing and taking into account their contributions and the social work commitment to anti-oppressive practice becomes impoverished interactionally. This may also occur in other interactions between social workers and families. Furthermore, the way that parents are positioned results in further oppression of those who may have already experienced adversities and oppression. This suggests a mismatch between practice in child protection conferences and the core values of social work.

However, the context in which social workers and other professionals practise also is important. The marginalisation of parents' contributions in child protection

conferences likely reflects the complexities of facilitating genuine parental participation in an event that has protecting children as its primary aim and that is part of a system that is oriented towards child protection (Broadhurst & Holt, 2010; Holt & Kelly, 2016; Holt & Kelly, 2018). Whilst protecting children and partnership with parents are not at all mutually exclusive, their amalgamation is more challenging within a system that affords priority to child protection and has substantially moved away from a family support approach that attempts to give greater recognition to social factors such as poverty (Parton & Williams, 2017). The marginalisation of parents' contributions in my data also demonstrates that the current individualisation and child protection focus displaces commitments to anti-oppressive practice and social justice. What the findings of this study show is that this broader institutional order is perpetuated in and through interaction in child protection conferences. This adds to existing research and statistics (e.g. Association of the Directors of Children's Services, 2018; Bilson & Martin, 2017; Bilson & Munro, 2019; CAFCASS, 2018) which demonstrate that the way that the state responds to families is indicative of, and (re)produces, the dominant orientation towards an authoritarian child protection approach.

(Re)producing the institutional order in and through interaction

This section brings together and elaborates the discussion in the previous two sections and considers how the findings address the overarching aim of this thesis: to detail the approaches to working with children, parents and families when there are concerns about neglect that are constructed in and through interaction, focusing on the ways in which relationships between children, parents and the state are constructed interactionally.

A key contribution of this thesis is the connection that is made between what is constructed at a micro, interactional level and macro-level approaches and discourses relating to social work with children and families. There is little previous research that explores connections between broader understandings, policies and practices about protecting children and promoting their welfare and micro-level constructions of approaches to working with children, parents and families when there are concerns about neglect. Therefore, this research adds to existing knowledge by

providing a greater understanding of how social work contexts for practice are (re)produced in and through interaction. The findings from the interviews, focus groups and child protection conferences show that approaches to working with children, parents and families are situated and negotiated in interaction. The dominant picture that emerges is one in which vulnerable children need to be protected from risky parents by a state that acts in authoritarian ways that are justified as necessary. Parents are responsibilised and are understood as having the agency to change their circumstances (Morris *et al.*, 2017) but the social and economic contexts in which they live are disregarded. In contrast, the state, which contributes to the social conditions under which parenting occurs, is exempt from scrutiny. Moreover, in a practice context, both parents and partnership working are marginalised, evident in parents' shallow participation. I argue that this approach to working with children, parents and families that emerges at an interactional level within social workers' accounts of their practice and in a practice context reflects the contemporary dominance of a child protection approach within the broader context in which the interactants operate. A child protection approach increasingly relies on formal statutory interventions, a family support approach is marginalised and consequently there is 'a reduced and hardened role for the state' (Parton & Williams, 2017, pg. 93). The dominance of this approach and the historical, legal, social and political context for this was discussed in detail in Chapter 1. Thus, my findings show how the broader environment in which social workers and other professionals operate, the contemporary system of child protection, is perpetuated and legitimised within the local interactional context (Angouri, 2018; Dall & Caswell, 2017; Mäkitalo, 2002). They also suggest that whilst there has been a more recent focus on strengths-based approaches, they have so far had a limited impact in a child protection context.

This research also contributes to longer-term critical perspectives which seek to recognise and address injustices and oppression and which consider how social work values can be actualised in practice. The findings presented in this thesis illuminate how social workers navigate the tensions between the demands placed on them by the contemporary orientation towards child protection and family support, partnership working and the principles of anti-oppressive practice and social justice, tensions which are particularly apposite in the context of child neglect. The findings

chapters have demonstrated that in social workers' accounts of practice and in a practice context, a child protection approach dominated and other approaches were marginalised. My research provides an understanding of the mechanisms through which the broader context is perpetuated and maintained and a greater understanding of why social workers may find it challenging to reconcile practices with the core values of social work that are obfuscated within the dominant individualised, risk-based approach.

The (re)production of the broader child protection orientation within interaction identified in this thesis has implications for children, parents and families. The findings further support the argument that the current orientation towards child protection is problematic because of the way it positions parents and families and because of the way that the state responds to those families involved in child protection (Featherstone *et al.*, 2018; Featherstone *et al.*, 2014b). Families' problems are understood as being predominantly caused by parents and as resolvable through parents' actions. Consequently, the impact of adversity of various forms (including poverty, racism and gender violence) on families' problems and their ability to cope is under recognised. Families' problems are individualised, but there is also limited support to help families because of cuts to public services in the context of austerity. As argued in Chapter 1, these implications for parents and families are intensified when concerns about neglect are involved because of the gendered nature of neglect (Scourfield, 2003; Swift, 1995; Turney, 2000) and its connections with poverty and other forms of disadvantage (Bywaters *et al.*, 2018; Bywaters *et al.*, 2016a; Bywaters *et al.*, 2016b; Connell-Carrick, 2003; Spencer & Baldwin, 2005; Thoburn *et al.*, 2000).

There are further implications for children, parents and families arising from the dominant child protection approach highlighted in this thesis. The ways that children, parents and families are positioned and their problems are constructed are connected to the ways in which the state subsequently responds in terms of intervention (Keddell, 2011; Keddell, 2015; Nikander, 2003). By this I mean constructing particular events, aspects of parenting or parental behaviours as problematic affects the direction and focus of practice interventions. A particular worldview leads to particular social actions, a link between knowledge and social

action which is articulated by social constructionism (Burr, 2015). Therefore, constructing an orientation towards child protection at an interactional level in which parents are positioned as risky and are responsabilised is likely to lead to and perpetuate further authoritarian responses to parents and families and constrain possibilities for family support approaches, anti-oppressive practice and social justice.

Implications for social work knowledge, policy and practice

The findings from this research have implications for social work knowledge, policy and practice. Firstly, the findings contribute to longer term debates about power and oppression in social work (e.g. Dominelli, 2002; Healy, 2000; Healy, 2014; Thompson, 2016). Specifically, they add to social work knowledge about how power relations between professionals and service users are (re)constructed at the micro-level and how social workers' talk about their work and how social work practice (child protection conferences) contributes to the (re)production of the institutional reality. The findings also further support recognition of the challenges of promoting human rights and social justice, core values of social work, within an authoritarian neoliberal context (Healy, 1998; Healy, 2014; Holt & Kelly, 2016). The problematic ways in which parents and families were positioned and worked with in my study reinforces calls for alternative approaches to working with families in which relationship-based practice, ethics, humane practice and the social determinants of harm are foregrounded (e.g. Featherstone *et al.*, 2018; Featherstone *et al.*, 2014b; Gupta *et al.*, 2014; Holt & Kelly, 2018; Saar-Heiman & Gupta, 2019).

Whilst acknowledging the challenges of working differently in a system orientated towards child protection, my findings have implications for social work practice. Exploring and sharing the ways that social workers make sense of their work can result in greater understanding of the positions they take and provide for the possibility of taking other positions. Re-framing practices may be helpful in facilitating reflections about practice. Additionally, increasing awareness of the dominant professional constructions that are rooted in wider system approaches may offer social workers the possibility to resist them in ways that avoid parents and their problems being constructed in potentially oppressive ways (Keddell, 2015). For

example, studies of the impact of processes and tools (such as the ICS and CAF form) on everyday social work practice reveals how social workers and managers are able to operate discretionary power and resist regulation of their practice, despite the constraints of the system (Wastell *et al.*, 2010; White *et al.*, 2009). There are commonalities here with Lipsky's (1980) notion of the street level bureaucrat who makes sense of directives, rules and procedures, enacting public policy in their everyday work.

My findings have demonstrated that an interactional perspective on parental participation in child protection conferences about child neglect reveals a detailed and much more nuanced understanding of participation than has previously been evident. This demonstrates the benefits of an interactional perspective on participation which could be further used to examine social work practice with families. There is an emerging body of work focusing on language and interaction in social work (Hall *et al.*, 2014) and my findings show that there would be real benefit in extending this work to gain a greater understanding of how social work gets done at an interactional level.

My findings also have implications for policy and practice in relation to child protection conferences. There is a need for senior managers and policy makers to consider in greater depth the purposes and realities of parental participation in child protection in light of my findings about parents' shallow participation. Additionally, increasing social workers' and other professionals' awareness of their role in facilitating or restricting parents' participation could result in changes in the way that they respond to parents in child protection conferences. For example, the enacted authority of professionals could be used to acknowledge and explore more explicitly the differing views of parents so that their perspectives are recognised and understood more clearly.

As my findings demonstrated that parents' participation was more likely to be effective when the topic was parents' positive actions and what was going well, I suggest that there is scope for foregrounding to a greater extent parents' strengths and positive actions within child protection conferences. For example, in the Strengthening Families model (Appleton *et al.*, 2015) parents are given the role of

discussing the family's strengths. My findings about the challenges of parental participation in child protection also support further exploration of decision making approaches that are family led, such as Family Group Conferences (FGCs), within the child protection process. For example, the trial in Leeds of the use of FGCs instead of initial child protection conferences yielded reports of positive experiences from families (Mason *et al.*, 2017).

Future research directions

The contributions made by this research could be developed as follows: firstly, given that interaction in child protection conferences is significantly under-researched, any future research involving child protection conferences would expand the research base. For example, my study did not include child protection conferences where it was decided that the child protection plan should end. It is likely that these meetings would include more extensive discussion of the parents' positive actions and what was going well. Therefore, as indicated by my research, there may be more meaningful participation by parents allowing further exploration and elicitation of the strategies and interactional resources used by parents to negotiate effective participation.

In a similar vein, there is a small amount of evidence that solution-focused and strengths-based approaches to practice may be more facilitative of parents' participation in meetings (e.g. Appleton *et al.*, 2015). Whilst two of the child protection conferences included in my study involved a Signs of Safety approach (Turnell, 2012), limited differences between these conferences and the one that did not use this approach were apparent and so they were not analysed separately (see Chapter 5). Future research could explore in greater depth how solution-focused and strength-based approaches are used in child protection conferences, informed by the findings on participation in my study and focusing on how participation is accomplished interactionally.

In my study, children did not attend any of the child protection conferences. Ascertaining children's wishes and feelings is crucial (Children Act 1989, 2004), yet there is consensus that children's involvement in child protection and child welfare

services does not happen often enough (Bijleveld *et al.*, 2015). Future research could focus on exploring the participation of children in child protection conferences using the definition and framework for analysing participation used in this study. This framework could be used to consider the extent to which children's participation is effective and to make suggestions for how children's participation in child protection conferences could be facilitated.

This study only examined one specific event in which versions of events, actions and people were constructed, demonstrating the considerable role of social workers and other professionals in controlling information. Yet during the child protection process there will be multiple occasions when versions are presented, information is selected and views are put forward such as during the section 47 enquiry and assessment. Future research could explore meaning making during these other events and processes, making linkages across encounters, attending to the extent to which the views and contributions of parents and social workers are included and have influence.

There are opportunities to apply and extend the model of participation proposed in this thesis within other contexts. There is scope for future research to apply the model proposed in this thesis to other meetings with an explicit decision making function, such as in a business context, to inform understandings of interactional participation in these settings. Additionally, informed by an emerging body of research on multimodal interaction in meetings (e.g. Asmuß, 2015; Markaki & Mondada, 2012; Mondada, 2007; Mondada, 2011; Mondada, 2013), the model proposed in this thesis could be expanded through analysis of video recordings of meetings in a range of settings to include the accomplishment of participation through body movements, expressions, the use of material space and so forth.

Finally, there was a considerable dominance in this study of discourses of child protection in contrast to those that emphasise family support and anti-oppressive perspectives. Further work could usefully add to anti-oppressive research and theorising by focusing on instances where the dominant discourse is resisted (see e.g. Broadhurst, 2012) and on how family support approaches and anti-oppressive practices are manifested at an interactional level and how they are enacted in practice

with families. These kinds of future studies could lend support to the much-needed alternative narrative that continues to be present in social work theorising and practice (e.g. Featherstone *et al.*, 2018; Featherstone *et al.*, 2014b; Gupta *et al.*, 2014; Healy, 2014; Holt & Kelly, 2018; Saar-Heiman & Gupta, 2019; Thompson, 2016) but which is absent from current policy and political discourses.

Concluding remarks

The study presented in this thesis has demonstrated that, at an interactional level, an orientation towards a risk-averse child protection approach is constructed with a concomitant marginalisation of family support and anti-oppressive practice approaches. This reflects, but also constitutes, the broader context in which a similar approach dominates, illustrating how the local interactional context shapes and is shaped by institutional realities.

What is most significant about the findings of this study is the implications for parents and families. The dominant approach responsabilises parents and elevates individualising and pathologizing discourses at the expense of explanations which foreground the social and structural factors that contribute to families' problems. As well as being responsabilised, parents were also marginalised in child protection conferences with the professional view and professional power dominating. The way that parents are positioned is contrary to anti-oppressive practice and the value base of social work.

Whilst drawing attention to concerns in relation to wider policy and system influences, this study has primarily focused on talk and interaction. Adding to a growing counter-narrative which emphasises the importance of relationship-based practice, ethics, humane practice and the social determinants of harm, and research on the operation of discretionary power by social workers, this study's focus on the constitutive role of language also provides possibilities for challenging the dominant muscular child protection paradigm in everyday social work encounters and practice talk.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview guide

CPC MANAGERS/CHAIRS

1. Job title
2. How long have you been in your role? (if recently appointed, what role did you hold previously?)
3. How long have you been qualified as a social worker?
4. Briefly, what does your role involve?

CPC managers only:

5. How many children on child protection plans are there currently? How many for neglect?
6. How has this changed historically?
7. What are the biggest challenges facing your service currently?

CPC Chairs only:

8. Could you tell me (whilst preserving anonymity) about a conference you chaired recently that you felt pleased with, that involved concerns about neglect.

Follow-up questions if needed:

9. Specifically, what were the presenting concerns?
10. What was the impact/potential impact on the child?
11. How did the family view the situation?
12. What were the views of other professionals?
13. What was the decision of the conference?
14. Can you explain the reasoning of the conference to come to that decision?
15. What was helpful in making that decision?
16. What was it that you were particularly pleased about?
17. Looking back, would you do anything different?

CPC chairs and managers:

Making the decision to convene an initial child protection conference

18. What kinds of cases of neglect come to conference?
Can you describe some typical features? Can you describe the range? (type of neglect, harm to child, risk, family factors, severity, duration, previous involvement, incident)
What is the impact of poverty on families where there are concerns about neglect?

19. How is it decided that a case of neglect has met the threshold for conference?
What is the decision making process? Involvement of social worker, team manager, operational manager, chair?
What will inform the decision? Features of the case, views of other professionals
20. In what circumstances is it easier to make a decision about whether a case meets the threshold for conference? When is it harder?

At the conference (initials and reviews)

21. What is the purpose of the pre-conference discussion with parents or other family members?
What is discussed?
Do you talk to parents about how they can make a contribution?
22. Are the reports of sufficient quality to gain an understanding of the impact of the neglect on the child?
What makes a good quality report?
23. Are all contributions to the conference helpful?
Which are the most helpful?
24. Do the right practitioners attend?
If not, in your view, which professional groups should be attending more/less?
25. How are concerns about neglect discussed with the parents?
How are concerns described?
What words are used?
How are parents brought 'on side'?
26. Tell me about how children's wishes and feelings are presented and discussed in conferences.
27. Is there sufficient time for analysis of information within the conference?
28. In what circumstances is it easier to make a decision about whether to make a child subject to a child protection plan?
When is it harder?
Is there disagreement?
How are disagreements resolved?
29. Are there times when there are dilemmas about which abuse category should be selected?
What about deciding between the categories of emotional abuse and neglect?
30. When is it easier to make a decision about whether to discontinue a child protection plan?

When is it harder?
Is there disagreement?
How are disagreements resolved?

31. What is the process for drawing up an outline plan at the conference?
How is this plan developed after the conference?
32. In your experience, do conferences convened for reasons of neglect differ from those convened because of other types of maltreatment? If yes, how?

OPERATIONAL MANAGERS

1. Job title
2. How long have you been in your role? (if recently appointed, what role did you hold previously?)
3. How long have you been qualified as a social worker?
4. Briefly, what does your role involve?
5. Can you outline for me what your team does?
What geographical location does it cover?
What kind of cases does your team deal with?
How are referrals made to your team/cases transferred to your team?
MASH?

Making the decision to convene an initial child protection conference

6. How is it decided that a case of neglect has met the threshold for making a request for a conference?
What is the decision making process?
What will inform the decision?
What are the main challenges in making these kinds of decisions?
7. What kind of assessments will have been carried out before the decision to convene a conference is made? Further assessment before the conference takes place?
8. Could you explain what happens in a strategy meeting/discussion that takes place before the decision is made to convene a child protection conference.
Who is involved?
Who chairs?
What is discussed?
What reports/assessments are presented?
What is recorded?

The child protection conference and after

9. What information and views will inform the decision that is made in the child protection conference?
What is most influential, do you think?

10. Generally, is the outcome of the child protection conference what you expect?
If not, can you give an (anonymised) example of a decision that was not what you expected?
11. Could you explain the purpose of the core group meetings and what is discussed at these meetings.

General questions about neglect in the local area

12. What are the challenges faced when working with neglect in this area?
Has this changed over time?
13. Which aspects or types of neglect is usually the focus of social work involvement in this area?
How has this changed historically?
14. What factors help to explain why a family might find themselves in a neglectful situation in this particular local area?
What has the biggest impact?
15. What is the impact of poverty on families in this area? How does this link with neglect?

TEAM MANAGERS/SOCIAL WORKERS

1. Job title
2. How long have you been in your role? (if recently appointed, what role did you hold previously?)
3. How long have you been qualified as a social worker?
4. Briefly, what does your role involve?
5. Could you tell me (whilst preserving anonymity) about a conference you attended recently that you felt pleased with, that involved concerns about neglect.

Follow-up questions if needed:

6. Specifically, what were the presenting concerns?
7. What was the impact/potential impact on the child?
8. How did the family view the situation?
9. What were the views of other professionals?
10. What was the decision of the conference?
11. Can you explain the reasoning of the conference to come to that decision?
12. What was helpful in making that decision?
13. What was it that you were particularly pleased about?
14. Looking back, would you do anything different?

Making the decision to convene an initial child protection conference

15. What kinds of cases of neglect come to conference?
Can you describe some typical features? Can you describe the range?
(type of neglect, harm to child, risk, family factors, severity, duration, previous involvement, incident)
What is the impact of poverty on families where there are concerns about neglect?
16. How is it decided that a case of neglect has met the threshold for conference?
What is the decision making process?
What will inform the decision?
17. In what circumstances is it easier to make a decision about whether a case meets the threshold for conference? When is it harder?

At the conference (initials and reviews)

18. How are concerns about neglect discussed with the parents?
How are concerns described?
What words are used?
How are parents brought 'on side'?
19. Tell me about how children's wishes and feelings are presented and discussed in conferences.
20. Do the right practitioners attend? If not, what should change, in your view?
21. In what circumstances is it easier to make a decision about whether to make a child subject to a child protection plan?
When is it harder?
Is there disagreement?
How are disagreements resolved?
22. Are there times when there are dilemmas about which abuse category should be selected?
What about deciding between the categories of emotional abuse and neglect?
23. When is it easier to make a decision about whether to discontinue a child protection plan?
When is it harder?
Is there disagreement?
How are disagreements resolved?
24. In your experience, do conferences convened for reasons of neglect differ from those convened because of other types of maltreatment? If yes, how?

Appendix 2: Focus group guide

Focus groups – Social workers/managers

- 1) How would you describe neglect? Are there typical features of a neglect case? Does it depend on the child's age/needs? (Can you give an example?)
 - a. Are the cases that you work with locally similar to/different from to what you've just described? (Can you give an example?)
- 2) How do neglect cases differ from cases where other types of abuse or harm are the main issue, if there is a difference? (Prompt: families' circumstances, the child's needs, history of involvement)
 - a. Do neglect cases cause you more anxiety?
- 3) How do you determine when a neglect situation is severe enough to require child protection intervention? How long would the difficulties have been present? What about if a specific incident occurs?
 - a. How easy/difficult is it to determine harm/likelihood of harm in neglect cases? (Evidence, children's needs, parental culpability, case history)
- 4) What are the major challenges in working with cases of neglect in your area? What are the key local factors impacting on your work? Can you give an example?
- 5) How would you judge the success of your work with a family where there are concerns about neglect?
- 6) Taking into consideration all that we have discussed today, I'd like you to think about the Working Together definition of neglect.
 - a. How helpful is it?
 - b. How adequate is it?
 - c. Would you amend it?

Appendix 3: Invite for focus groups

Dear practitioners

My name is Eleanor Lutman-White and I am a PhD student at the University of Warwick. I am working with XXXXXXXXXX Council to undertake some research for my PhD on decision making in child protection conferences held because of concerns about neglect.

My research will explore the process of discussion and decision-making in cases where there are concerns about neglect by observing and audio recording what happens during initial child protection conferences. In particular, it will examine how the judgements and assessments of social workers and other professionals, as well as the views of family members, affect the process and outcome of the conference.

Before I begin to attend child protection conferences, I would like to hold a focus group with practitioners to discuss how neglect is understood and worked with locally so that I can get an understanding of the local context. I would like to audio record this focus group with permission. All contributions to the discussion will be kept confidential and anonymity would be preserved.

Please could you let XXXXXXXX know if you are able to attend the focus group planned for XXXXXXXXXX (date/time/venue).

Kind regards

Eleanor Lutman-White

Appendix 4: Invite for interviews

Dear practitioners

Eleanor Lutman-White, a PhD student at the University of Warwick, is working with XXXXXXXXXXXX Council to undertake some research for her PhD on decision making in child protection conferences held because of concerns about neglect.

The research will explore the process of discussion and decision-making in cases where there are concerns about neglect by observing and audio recording what happens during child protection conferences. In particular, it will examine how the judgements and assessments of social workers and other professionals, as well as the views of family members, affect the process and outcome of the conference.

As part of the research, Eleanor would like to interview a small number of practitioners to gain an understanding of the process of decision-making surrounding child protection conferences. The interviews would take no more than an hour and would be arranged at a time and location convenient for you. All contributions to the research will be kept confidential and anonymity would be preserved.

Please could you reply directly to Eleanor ([REDACTED]) if you are interested in being interviewed for the research.

Appendix 5: Information sheets for child protection conferences

Information sheet for professionals

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Project Title: Making decisions about children in child protection conferences

Name of Researcher: Eleanor Lutman-White

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

1. What is this research about?

Neglect is the most commonly used category for children becoming the subject of a child protection plan. However, the definition, nature, causes and consequences of child neglect can mean cases are complex to work with. The boundaries between neglect and other categories of abuse can also be difficult to define. Little is known about the detail of professionals' practice in this area of child protection and research rarely considers *how* decisions are made, rather than what is decided. This research will explore the process of discussion and decision-making in cases where there may be a concern about neglect by examining in detail the talk that takes place during initial child protection conferences.

2. Who is doing this research?

My name is Eleanor Lutman-White and I am a student at the University of Warwick. I am carrying out this research as part of my PhD degree. I am being supervised by Dr Christine Harrison. I have over 10 years' experience of doing research with children and families. The research is being overseen by xxxxxxxxxxxx the Principal Child and Family Social Worker from xxxxxxxxxxxx Council and has been approved by xxxxxxxx Safeguarding Children Board.

3. Who is being asked to participate?

You are being asked to participate because you have been invited to attend a child protection conference that will be taking place regarding a family where there are some concerns which include neglect. The other professionals involved, the parents and the child (where appropriate) are also being asked to take part.

4. Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

5. What will happen if I decide to take part?

You will attend the child protection conference as normal, you do not need to do anything extra. I will come to the child protection conference and record what is said at the conference using a small audio recorder. I will also take some notes. You would be able to ask me to leave the room or turn the recorder off at any point if you wanted to. I would ask to have copies of the social worker's report and minutes of the conference.

6. What are the possible benefits of taking part?

There will be no specific benefits to you, but I hope that the research will contribute to a greater understanding of how professionals work with neglect cases and will shape and improve practice in this area.

7. What are the possible risks of taking part?

There are unlikely to be any risks to taking part in the research. If at any point you feel you don't want me to hear what is being discussed at the conference you can ask me to leave or withdraw from the research.

8. What about confidentiality?

The research has received ethical approval from the University. All information provided for the research will be kept completely confidential. All names and other identifying information will be removed from the data so that it will not be possible to identify you. The data will be stored in locked cabinets or on password protected computers at the University (accessed only by me) and will be kept for 10 years after I have completed my PhD degree.

9. What will happen to the information collected for the research?

I will feed back the findings about this important area of practice to professional groups, perhaps as part of staff meetings or training, and to student social workers via the University. The data from this research will be used for my PhD thesis and academic research papers and presentations, although this will not be for a number of years. You will not be named in any report and no details will be used which would enable you to be identified.

I will write a summary of the findings which will be sent to participants if you provide me with some contact details.

10. Any questions?

I will be very happy to answer any further questions you have. I can be contacted on: [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]

11. What if I have a complaint or concerns?

If you have any complaints relating to a study conducted at the University or by the University's employees or students, you should contact the Director of Delivery Assurance:

Registrar's Office
University of Warwick
Coventry
CV4 8UW
Email: complaints@warwick.ac.uk

This information sheet is for you to keep.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

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www.warwick.ac.uk/c ll

Participant Information Sheet

Project Title: Making decisions about children in child protection conferences

Name of Researcher: Eleanor Lutman-White

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

12. What is this research about?

When children's services becomes involved with families they work together with everyone to try and improve things for children. However, it isn't always easy to know what the best thing to do is because there can be lots of different views and opinions and different factors to consider.

We don't know much about how professionals and families talk together and make decisions about how best to keep children and young people safe. This research will look specifically at situations where there concerns about children which are going to be discussed at a child protection conference.

The research is not asking you to be interviewed, I am only interested in seeing how everyone makes plans together in child protection conferences by coming to the meeting as an observer.

13. Who is doing this research?

My name is Eleanor Lutman-White and I am a student at the University of Warwick. I am carrying out this research for a PhD degree. I am being supervised by Dr Christine Harrison. I have over 10 years' experience of doing research with children and families. The research is being overseen by xxxxxxxxxxxx the Principal Child and Family Social Worker from xxxxxxxxxxxxxx Council.

14. Who is being asked to participate?

You are being asked to participate because you have been invited to attend a child protection conference that will be taking place to discuss some concerns about your child/children. All the other people who have been invited to attend the conference (for example the social worker, teachers, health professionals) will also be given information about the research.

15. What will happen if I decide to take part?

You will attend the child protection conference as normal, you do not need to do anything extra. I will come to the child protection conference and sit in the room but I won't say anything. I will record what is said at the conference using a small audio recorder placed in the middle of the table. I will also take some notes about what happens. You would be able to ask me to leave the room or turn the recorder off at any point if you wanted to. I would ask to have copies of the social worker's report and minutes (written record) of the conference.

16. Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be asked to sign a consent form to show you agreed to take part. If you decide

to take part you are still free to change your mind without giving a reason. **The decisions made in the child protection conference and the services you receive now and in the future from the local authority will not be affected in any way by your decision whether or not to take part in the research.**

17. What are the possible benefits of taking part?

There will be no benefits to you, but your experiences are important and this research will contribute to shaping and improving services for other children and families in the future.

18. What are the possible disadvantages or risks of taking part?

There will be no risks or disadvantages of taking part. I will only be observing the child protection conference and won't be interviewing you. If at any point you feel you don't want me to hear what is being discussed at the conference or my being there is making you upset you can ask me to leave or withdraw from the research.

19. What about confidentiality?

All information provided for the research will be kept completely confidential. All names and other identifying information will be removed from the research so that it will not be possible to identify you. The information will be stored in locked cabinets or on password protected computers at the University (accessed only by me) and will be kept for 10 years after I have completed my PhD degree.

20. What will happen to the information collected for the research?

The information from this research will only be used for my PhD degree. I will also do presentations for social services, other professionals and student social workers to tell them what I find out about what goes well in child protection conferences and the bits that could be made better. You will not be named in any report and no details will be used which would mean you could be identified.

I will write a summary of what I found out which will be sent to participants. If you are interested in receiving this summary you will need to give me some contact details.

21. Any questions?

I will be very happy to answer any further questions you have before the conference takes place. I can be contacted on: [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]

22. What if I have a complaint or concerns?

If you have any complaints relating to a study conducted at the University or by the University's employees or students, you should contact the Director of Delivery Assurance:

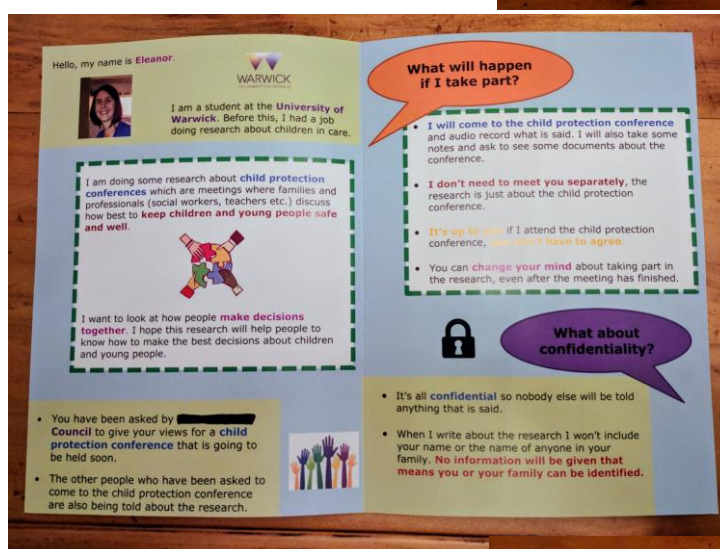
Registrar's Office
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Email: complaints@warwick.ac.uk

Centre for Lifelong Learning
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E cll@warwick.ac.uk
www.warwick.ac.uk/cll

**This information sheet is
for you to keep.**

**Thank you for taking the
time to read this
information sheet.**

Information sheet for young people



Appendix 6: Consent form for child protection conferences

CONSENT FORM

Project Title: Making decisions about children in child protection conferences

Name of Researcher: Eleanor Lutman-White

Tick

1. I have read and understood the information sheet for the above project which I can keep. I have been given the opportunity to ask any questions. ☐
2. I agree to take part in the above study and I agree to: ☐
- a) *The researcher attending the child protection conference and recording it with a portable audio recording device. The researcher will also make notes during the conference.*
- b) *The researcher having access to the social worker's report and the minutes (written record) of the conference.*
3. I understand that my information will be held and processed for the following purposes: ☐
- The findings of the research may be published and the researcher may use the exact words that were used in the child protection conference, the minutes or social worker's report in the write up of the study. However I will not be named and no details will be used which would enable me to be identified.*
 - All information provided for the research will be kept completely confidential.*
 - The recording of the child protection conference and any other documents will be kept securely and destroyed after 10 years*
4. I understand that I don't have to take part if I don't want to and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without being penalised or disadvantaged in any way. I understand that I can ask for the recording to be stopped or I can ask the researcher to leave the room at any time. I can withdraw from the research even after the conference has finished but I can only do this up to 6 months after the date of the conference. ☐

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Researcher

Date

Signature

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www.warwick.ac.uk/cll

Appendix 7: Consent forms for interviews and focus groups

CONSENT FORM

Project Title: Child neglect and child protection conferences

Name of Researcher: Eleanor Lutman-White

Tick

1. I understand that this research is about child protection conferences held when there are concerns about neglect. One of the aims of the research is to understand how decisions are made. I have been given the opportunity to ask any questions.

☐

2. I agree to take part in the above study and I agree to:

☐

a) Being interviewed.

b) The researcher recording the interview with a portable audio recording device.

3. I understand that my information will be held and processed for the following purposes:

- The findings of the research may be published and the researcher may use the exact words that were said in the interview. However I will not be named and no details will be used which would enable me to be identified.*
- All information provided for the research will be kept completely confidential.*
- The recording of the interview and any other documents will be kept securely and destroyed after 10 years.*

☐

4. I understand that I don't have to take part if I don't want to and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without being penalised or disadvantaged in any way. I understand that I can ask for the recording to be stopped at any time. I can withdraw from the research even after the interview has finished but I can only do this up to 6 months after the date of the interview.

☐

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Researcher

Date

Signature

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CONSENT FORM

Project Title: Child neglect and child protection conferences

Name of Researcher: Eleanor Lutman-White

Tick

1. I understand that this research is about child protection conferences held when there are concerns about neglect. One of the aims of the research is to understand how practitioners work with neglect. I have been given the opportunity to ask any questions. ☐
2. I agree to take part in the above study and I agree to: ☐
- a) *Taking part in a focus group.*
b) *The researcher recording the focus group with a portable audio recording device.*
3. I understand that my information will be held and processed for the following purposes: ☐
- *The findings of the research may be published and the researcher may use the exact words that were said in the focus group. However I will not be named and no details will be used which would enable me to be identified.*
 - *All information provided for the research will be kept completely confidential.*
 - *The recording of the focus group and any other documents will be kept securely and destroyed after 10 years.*
4. I understand that I don't have to take part if I don't want to and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without being penalised or disadvantaged in any way. I understand that I can ask for the recording to be stopped at any time. I can withdraw from the research even after the focus group has finished but I can only do this up to 6 months after the date of the focus group. ☐

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Researcher

Date

Signature

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Appendix 8: Transcription conventions

The transcription symbols used in this thesis are derived from the system developed by Gail Jefferson (see also Sidnell, 2010).

[A left square bracket marks the start of overlapping speech
negle-	A hyphen marks a cut-off word
<u>said</u>	Underlining indicates emphasis or stress of the word
°yeah°	Raised circles around a word or phrase signal noticeably quieter delivery
well=	Equals sign indicates contiguous utterances
so::	Colons show the degree of elongation of the previous sound
↑↓	Upward and downward arrows mark rising or falling shifts in pitch
>fast< <slow>	‘Less than’ and ‘greater than’ signs show markedly faster or slower speech
(.)	A short pause, untimed
(2.0)	Numbers in brackets show the length of pauses in seconds
()	Parentheses indicate indecipherable talk
(where)	Words in parentheses indicate uncertain transcriptions
((cough))	Double brackets are used for notes by the transcriber
[....]	Section of transcript omitted

Appendix 9: Sample of coding

822 already said is there any concerns he's raised
 823 SW [I know he's only two
 824 his own he you will talk at him and he will say something
 825 maybe pointing at a story or something else
 826 CH Okay sounds adorable I have to say
 827 SW Yeah ()
 828 CH Er team manager do you want to add anything there or can] speaker selection
 829 we move on topic / agenda
 830 TM Erm no no -align progression
 831 CH Okay moving round anyone else on er er Fin- Dylan=
 832 HV =Dylan so Dylan was offered the universal health visiting
 833 service since February two thousand and fifteen
 834 CH uhuh
 835 HV Erm ((colleague))'s prepared a report s- to give us sort
 836 of an idea of the contacts since since he's been born and
 837 there is sort of a pattern of erm of DNA's so not pattern, repetition
 838 attending appointments erm then the thing that's over time
 839 outstanding is the speech and language so we've initially
 840 made the referral in July last year time, problematised parental action
 841 CH uhuh pattern's role + responsibilities
 842 HV And to our knowledge he hasn't been for an appointment is
 843 Q that right child as suspect rather than parent
 844 M When was the appointment for
 845 HV Well you will have received the appointment so we make the concrete,
 846 referral which we did [in July and then you will have had definite
 847 M [yeah
 848 HV Contact from the speech and language department erm
 849 [to arrange an appointment
 850 M [I'm pretty sure one of the appointments were erm on the] explanation
 851 day that Finley started school
 852 HV Okay I mean I haven't got that appointment erm but it's
 853 sort of just to highlight that this that it was picked up] inter-accusatory
 854 time last summer [and it's still and issue that's ongoing] rejection of
 855 CH [yeah] the explanation, original concern
 856 HV And what's ((colleague)) recorded accountability
 857 [is that you're not concerned 3rd party eras's more direct charge?
 858 M [I have attended an appointment with ((colleague)) up at
 859 the children's XXXXXXXXXX children's centre did they tell
 860 you that
 861 HV Yeah she's a nurse [one of the nursery nurses [yeah she's
 862 M [yeah [and she give] I am doing
 863 me some advice which I've been following something
 864 HV Yeah that's good about it -
 865 M But also obviously they do speech and language at the redefining
 866 nursery self
 867 HV [yeah
 868 N [and er Natalie erm said that we could refer directly
 869 which is what we've done but I just need it signing ()
 870 HV Yeah so th- that's just to say that [we we did that direct] rejection of
 871 CH [yeah] explanation
 872 HV Referral July last year and it's still] restraint of original
 873 CH It's still outstanding concerns
 874 HV It's still outstanding yeah
 875 CH Okay and mum's saying that she thinks that referral was
 876 erm made for the day that h- he was at school or
 877 [started school
 878 M [I'm sure I'm sure there was one appointment [that was direct
 879 CH [did you question as a
 880 rebook it charge?
 881 M Erm I w- d'you know what Finley's had his grommets done
 882 erm over that period of time as well so we had a lot going
 883 on with the hospital and stuff
 884 CH uhuh minimal response?
 885 M Erm there was a few other things that had happened round
 886 that period of time as well
 887 CH uhuh
 888 HV [I mean we can I can check that for you and have all that
 889 M [I can't recollect right right this second but there was a
 890 HV info
 891 M Lot going on
 892 ? Umm yeah
 893 M [My grandad had his heart attack it was just everything
 894 just went to pot it was a [nightmare
 895 CH [okay [okay
 896 ? yeah
 897 CH But it's something we need to prioritise [isn't it
 898 M further charge/concern [yeah yeah well I implies
 899 I've spoken to ((nursery manager)) about it so it's not done
 900 like I haven't done anything \refer back to her earlier anything
 901 CH uhuh comments
 902 M D'you know what I mean
 903 ? [Er but I just
 904 CH [so you've- and you've spoken to the children's centre and
 905 M Yeah I had an appointment with XXXXXXXX up at XXXXXXXX
 906 children's centre i- I attended that [and erm she we-
 [okay] mother
 [uhuh] minimises
 [I don't get me] concern